Queen of Romance, Margaret Way, guarantees a rich, powerful page-turner. If you love her intensely emotional and romantic stories, you'll love sparkling new Australian talent Jennie Adams. Both authors bring their homeland alive in…

Australian Bachelors, Sassy Brides

Watch the sparks fly as these billionaire businessmen win the hearts and hands of their sassy brides!

Praise for Margaret Way

"With climactic scenes, dramatic imagery and bold characters, Margaret Way makes the Outback come alive…"

—RT Book Reviews

Praise for Jennie Adams

"Feel-good fantasy with [an] edge."

—RT Book Reviews

Dear Reader,

We all love our fairy tales. We grew up on them. Some of our sweetest, most lasting memories are of having them read to us in bed by either mom or dad. As a child who never had her head out of a book, I had a huge collection of fairy tales. I adored them. No surprise then that I'm enthralled by Chinese and Japanese films filled with magic! Just to say the word is to feel the imagination soar. Go on. Try it. Magic.

The most famous fairy story of all time would have to be that of Cinderella. There are countless versions of it around the world but the story actually originated in ancient China! We have our deprived Cinderella, the wicked stepmother, the good fairy and to make all Cinderella's dreams come true, the prince who will transform her life.

Cinderella had her dreams. So does my heroine, Nyree, who through cruel circumstances has lived a sad, lonely life. To reward her strong spirit and determination to succeed, she meets her good fairy who in classic tradition introduces her to her wonderful prince. Fairy tales do occasionally come true for those who keep the faith.

All my best wishes to my devoted readership.

God bless you,

Margaret Way

MARGARET WAY

JENNIE ADAMS

Australian Bachelors, Sassy Brides

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MARGARET WAY

The Wealthy Australian’s Proposal

Margaret Way, a definite Leo, was born and raised in the subtropical river city of Brisbane, capital of the sunshine state of Queensland. A Conservatorium-trained pianist, teacher, accompanist and vocal coach, she found her musical career came to an unexpected end when she took up writing—initially as a fun thing to do. She currently lives in a harborside apartment at beautiful Raby Bay, a thirty-minute drive from the state capital, where she loves dining al fresco on her plant-filled balcony, overlooking a translucent green marina filled with all manner of pleasure crafts, from motor cruisers costing millions of dollars and big, graceful yachts with carved masts to little bay runabouts. No one is in a mad rush, and she finds the laid-back village atmosphere very conducive to her writing. With well over a hundred books to her credit, she still believes her best is yet to come.

CHAPTER ONE

NYREE had been up at the crack of dawn. Her great friend and benefactor Miss Em, also known as Professor Emilia Scott, was coming home after a month spent in beautiful New Zealand with her sister, Louisa. The two sisters were very close. Nyree had not been so blessed. She had no sister to share her joys and pains, let alone the agony of sudden and violent family bereavement.

Six years before, when she was just into her teens, her parents had been travelling home from a piano recital. Her mother had been driving—unusual when her husband was with her. They had been very happy

that night. Her parents had been soul mates and great music lovers. But, as fate would have it, the night that had begun so happily had ended in disaster. Speeding towards them had been a young man who, despite the law, was using his mobile phone to have a half-hearted argument with his girlfriend about where to go for a weekend away.

The police investigation had concluded that the young man had been so preoccupied with his conversation he had momentarily lost control of the vehicle and swerved onto the wrong side of the road—right into the path of the oncoming car.

Fate moved the players. Man was but a pawn.

Two vehicles taken out. Three deaths. Shattered lives for all who were left.

Those were the days when Nyree had felt her loss so starkly she literally hadn't been able to speak. Not even when her grandmother, Jessica, had told her to "get a grip". She had been taken in, albeit reluctantly, by her father's parents, the only relatives to hand. No matter what pain she'd been in, her grandmother had never let up telling her to "get a grip". It had become a familiar mantra. Never had her grandmother said, I'm here for you, Nyree. We share our pain.

That had never happened. Not then. Not now.

When she was small Nyree had sensed her grandmother didn't much like her, and hadn't liked or approved of her beautiful mother, who'd been of Italian descent. That had been considered a serious drawback. Her grandmother was stuck with an old Anglo-Celt mindset at a time when the nation embraced multiculturalism. Jessica had been so certain her son had made a disastrous marriage, a clairvoyant might have told her.

The bliss of her parents' marriage had proved her wrong.

Nyree almost hated her grandmother, but couldn't quite make it. Maybe hate had been left out of her nature, but it had got pretty bad. Almost overnight she'd gone from being a day student at the prestigious school she had attended since Grade One to being a boarder. Her parents, who had been so proud of their little girl, had wanted her to have the best of everything. Swinton College was the best. The college was just down the road, not halfway across the country, but Jessica had dived on the idea of Nyree's becoming a boarder. The truth was, Jessica was actually unfit to be a grandmother.

"Your grandmother means well." Her grandfather, Alan, a far more kindly person, had tried to explain away the decision. He'd known for sure his wife didn't mean well. He'd been married to her for over forty years.

"The child is the spitting image of her mother. I can't handle that. She'd be better off at boarding school. Don't we keep hearing how bright she is?"

To heap tragedy upon tragedy—didn't it always go in threes?—Alan Allcott had died of a heart attack little more than a year later. Fourteen by then, Nyree had been done with being shocked by anything.

"Heartbreak!" her grandmother had pronounced, placing the blame. "That mother of yours is the cause of all this. She was the one driving that night. Not my beloved Martin. My son! He would have known how to take evasive action."

So Grandfather Allcott had made his departure without a lot of fuss. Maybe he had had too much of married life. Another funeral to attend. There she had met her grandfather's brother, Howard, for the first and only time. Howard was "the black sheep of the family", according to Jessica—based on the fact her great-uncle Howard had abandoned the family business over thirty years ago to join an artists' colony in Far North Queensland. She'd made it sound the height of decadence. Great-Uncle Howard had appeared very different from his brother. But then Great-Uncle Howard didn't have a wife like Jessica to sour his system. Despite that, Nyree had persisted in searching for some redeeming feature in her grandmother.

She’d found none.

It had been Miss Em—Professor Emilia Scott, Principal of Swinton College for Girls—who’d kept a keen compassionate eye on Nyree Allcott, one of her star pupils. She’d known all about Nyree’s sad home situation and had applauded the girl’s strength of character. It had been Miss Em who’d come to Nyree’s rescue when her grandmother had more or less kicked her out a month after her school graduation.

“I’ve done my duty by you, Nyree. You’ve been given a first-class education. Now you must stand on your own two feet.”

Where was she supposed to go? She was after all only seventeen years old.

Miss Em had risen to the occasion—though Nyree’s grandmother had been quite beyond her understanding—offering Nyree the comfortable guest flat built underneath her graceful old colonial mansion that looked out over the deep broad river. The older woman had suggested, as Nyree was no longer at school, she should call her Emilia, but Nyree had thought it inappropriate to address her former principal and mentor in such an informal way. It wasn’t as though they were level pegging. Miss Em was a woman of stature. She was the greatly respected, always approachable Professor Scott. Miss Em had been Nyree’s compromise, and Emilia had let it go at that.

Those days had been very hectic. Then her first year university exams had been over. Nyree had studied child psychology. God knew she had enough insight into the lives of sad and lonely, love-deprived children. She had done well, though it had been no easy thing finding the time to study, often into the early hours, while still maintaining two part-time jobs.

In the years since she had left Swinton College she and Miss Em had become great friends. A good deal of her time had been spent in the main house, enjoying Miss Em’s stimulating company—and, as Miss Em had always reassured her, “I’m enjoying every minute, Nyree. Your company is delightful.”

It made a nice change from, “Goodbye—good riddance!”

Out on a hillside walk one day, among the yellow blossoming wattles, Nyree had shouted it to the heavens. “Thank you, God, for Miss Em.”

She had no idea if He was up there, but she’d said it all the same. When in doubt, any port in a storm! Either way, Nyree Allcott, a true orphan of the storm, had been saved by the generosity and compassion of a wonderful woman.

Barely a year later Fate, over which no one had control, had stepped in again. While Nyree and two of her university friends—ex-Swinton girls—had been enjoying a companionable cup of tea with “Prof Scott”. Emilia, with hardly a sick day behind her, had tipped her head back against her wing-backed chair and calmly exhaled a single out breath. It had been her last. That splendid heart had simply given out.

Nyree couldn’t even begin to ask herself why. What was the point? She had lost her best friend in the world. Given her history, what could she expect?

Later, when the heavily attended funeral and wake was over, Miss Em's sister Louisa had taken Nyree's trembling hand, telling her she was the granddaughter Emilia had never had. "She loved you, Nyree. She fully intended to change her will, never thinking she would go so quickly. Did any of us, dear girl? I've made out a cheque, which you must take. It will help you through until you get on your feet. It's what Emilia intended."

Everything had been wrapped up quickly after that. Louisa had returned to her family in New Zealand. The Scott family home had been put on the market and sold within a week. Nyree, numb with grief, had moved into a rented house with her university friends.

About ten days ago a letter had arrived with the name of a well-known law firm stamped on the lower left hand corner. Nyree had stood in the hallway, weighing the letter in her hand. She hadn't been able to begin to guess what it contained.

"Open it. Open it!" advised her friend Michelle, peering over the upstairs banister.

"I don't have the heart to open it."

"Let me do it." Michelle raced down the steps. "Maybe your old witch of a grandmother wants to settle some money on you."

"When hell freezes over!" Her grandmother was still hale and hearty. Nyree expected she would leave her entire estate to her chihuahua, Miranda.

Michelle ripped open the letter excitedly, while Nyree stood holding her breath.

"You'd better read this, Nyree. It looks like something good!"

And so it had proved. At a time when Nyree had believed nothing good was going to happen to her, something had.

Miss Em had indeed been a woman to reckon with. In the last six months of her life she had tracked down Nyree's great-uncle, Howard Allcott. She had not met him in person, but they had exchanged letters and spoken on the phone. During that time Miss Em had managed to instil in Howard Allcott a much-needed sense of family. The evidence was right there in front of Nyree's stunned eyes. Howard had died at seventy-nine, making Nyree the sole beneficiary of his estate. Nyree had been requested to make an appointment to see a Mr Morris Brockway, an associate of the firm, who was handling Howard Allcott's estate.

CHAPTER TWO

A FEW days later Nyree had found out that, although there was no money to speak of, there was the greatest gift in the world:

A house!

She hadn't been able to believe it. Her heart had leapt with gratitude. She owned a home of her own, with paintings lining every wall.

“You like art, eh?” the solicitor asked with an indulgent smile.

He had never seen a more beautiful young girl in his life. The combination of large lustrous dark eyes, their beauty emphasised by arching black brows and long black eyelashes, flawless olive skin and a rioting mane of caramel coloured hair sun streaked with gold, was breathtaking. He wondered if that remarkable hair was dyed—it was so startling against the big, velvety dark eyes.

“I like the idea of a home of my own more.” Nyree’s excitement was just barely held in check.

“Don’t get me wrong here,” the solicitor warned. “My understanding is it’s no mansion. It was the homestead for an old sugar plantation. Most of the land has been sold off, but there’s quite a bit remaining and the land has become valuable. Word is DHH has plans to build a big eco-friendly tourist resort up there.”

“DHH?” Nyree felt the first shiver of premonition.

“Surely you’ve heard of it? It’s huge—although they operate mainly in the North. David Hollister is a billionaire many times over. DHH is David Hollister Holdings. He owns great chunks of everything. Builder, developer, air and road freight, pastoral interests, a chain of resorts. His son and heir, Brant, is a chip off the old block, I believe. He’s very much in the news these days, with his dad handing more and more over to him. I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if you hear from the son. He’s an architect as well an engineer; his father’s right-hand man. Good for you to know in advance. I’m certain if you hang out you’ll get an excellent price.”

“Except I won’t be selling, Mr Brockway.” There was a determined gleam in Nyree’s eyes. “DHH will have to look elsewhere.”

She took the train from the state capital, Brisbane, to tropical North Queensland, travelling along more than a thousand miles of incredibly lush coastline to get to her destination—the town of Hollister. No question it had been named after the illustrious billionaire or his buccaneering forefathers. Another thousand miles of coastline remained if one wanted to explore the prodigal wilderness of Cape York. No train line had been constructed to go up there. It was still frontier country. Extremely remote, the entire region was covered with rainforest that was becoming of great botanical interest.

She had never fully realised just how big her home state was—667,000 miles of it. It was enough to swallow up Western Europe and still leave the long Pacific coastline and hundreds of offshore islands. She was so looking forward to visiting the Great Barrier Reef—one of the wonders of the world. It would be right on her doorstep. The entire journey was giving her such a thrill. She wondered if Miss Em knew about it all? If there really was a Heaven, Miss Em surely had been whizzed up first-class.

/> Glorious country rolled past her window, gilded by the sun. It was a lyrical landscape, with a sky a dense cloudless blue above a shimmering membrane of silver heat.

The great numbers of farms astonished her. She saw peanut farms, citrus farms, banana

plantations, sugar plantations—an eternal presence in the tropics—lush cattle-fattening properties with humped Brahmins cooling off in blue lotus-filled ponds. As the train passed, they lazily lifted their heads to gaze at the spectacle. It was a panorama of endless green, with the rich red earth smothered in vegetation and ranks of palm trees waving their fronds in the breeze.

A great wealth of mineral resources lay further inland and to the north-west. Mount Isa, with its enormous deposits of copper, lead, zinc and silver; Weipa with its bauxite over the larkspur Great Dividing Range on the distant skyline. Great crimson pioncianas were in bloom everywhere—beside the track, in the fields; there were mango trees laden with fruit, coral trees, tulip trees in orange flower, cascaras with yellow blooms, the ubiquitous coconut palms, bougainvillaea—that brilliant parasite—running wild over abandoned fences, water tanks and the roofs of old timber homesteads left empty and neglected in the all powerful sun. She was going to need a camera to capture this prodigal world.

Along the way they pulled into stations made resplendent with displays of staghorns, elkhorns, palms, a staggering variety of cascading ferns and the state emblem—the purple Cooktown orchid in butterfly abundance. It made the trip even more spectacular. She had done well choosing the Sunlander train over taking a plane. Now she knew so much of the countryside. She wanted to know so much more.

But it was hot! Very hot. The instant she stood out on the platform at her destination, clutching her capacious tote, she felt the humidity on her skin. She had been wearing a short lime-green bolero over an amethyst singlet top; now she took the bolero off and tucked it into her bag. Her hair was curling riotously in the humid heat. Time to twist it into a knot. Maybe she would have to get her hair cut?

All around her, faces were baked brown. Everyone was very casually dressed—the young women in skimpy tank tops and really short shorts, the young men in much the same. Older people were a little more on the conservative side. Not much. Lots of colourful tropical shirts. A mix of races. Really good-looking people.

Curly strands were flying everywhere like corkscrews. She brushed them back impatiently, aware her whole body was dewed with sweat. Another fumble in her bag for her sunglasses. The glare was fantastic! She had never seen such light, even in sub-tropical Brisbane. No wonder artists headed up here. What she had to do now was find a cab. It would probably cost an arm and a leg—unless there was a bus to her destination. Somehow she doubted it. Her house—what elation to be able to say that!—was on the outskirts of the town.

She watched as the luggage came off. She had marked her suitcase with a length of red ribbon for easy identification. The only problem was quite a few other people had not only had the same idea, but the same choice of colour. Luggage collected, she looked left and right. The passengers and the people who had come to greet them had all but melted away. Time for her to set off. She was all revved up without knowing exactly where to go. Ask someone. The obvious answer. Only the street outside looked deserted. Where the heck had they all gone? Life was full of profound questions. Like where had all the frogs of her childhood gone? Where did the flies go in winter? They had to go somewhere.

Frangipani trees were in prolific flower, their luscious perfume rising in the hot air like incense. The train station was just outside of this very pretty town's business centre. Should she head there to catch a cab? In the distance, towards the glittering Coral Sea, she could see cranes and hoardings with "DHH" on them.

DHH had better not trouble her. She was a woman in possession. No amount of money would induce her to give up her new home. University wouldn't start up again until late February early March. She was even thinking of finishing her degree at Cook University in Townsville. Not that far away. It offered a broad range of disciplines, even enjoying world leadership in subjects of special importance to the tropics—

health, environment, tropical diseases, bio-medical work. She had looked up the full list of faculties, bachelor, post graduate and masters programs on the website. Cook University would suit her very well.

Nyree stood upright, though it wasn't easy when she had to hold on to her heavy suitcase with one arm and keep her tote firmly over her shoulder with the other. All of a sudden the town centre seemed a long way off. She could see the importance of acclimatization. The sun was burning a hole in the top of her head.

She had scarcely crossed one road, heading for the main street, when a big silver Mercedes pulled up alongside her. Temporarily defeated, she dropped her bag, watching with bated breath as the driver swung out of the car, rounded the bonnet and came towards her.

In those precise moments she experienced the same panic she'd felt as a child that instant before she fell off her bike. This would be a life-changing encounter. She was sure of it. Maybe there was something of the witch in her? Her grandmother, Jessica, still claimed Nyree's mother had bewitched her son.

The man moving so lithely towards her was lean, sleek and strongly muscled. He brought to mind the image of a graceful black leopard. To top that he was impressively tall—inches over six feet. Turquoise eyes glittered in his darkly tanned face. He had very distinctive, very precise features. In fact, the definite planes and angles and the high chiselled cheekbones gave him a decidedly exotic look. Some famous guy had had cheekbones like that. Who was it? A name popped up. Rudolf Nureyev. But Nureyev had been Russian. Nevertheless this guy had that kind of face. One you wouldn't forget in a hurry.

At any rate, the sight of him was as good as paralysing her. Such a phenomenon did exist. She clasped her tote tighter to her chest. The feeling of panic didn't subside. If anything it increased, sweeping like brushfire from her head to her toes. The feeling was too powerful to be anything good. She knew it in the primitive depths of her female psyche.

"Where on earth are you heading?"

Her ears picked up like radar. The commanding voice, along with the looks and the manner—that did it! Her reaction was instantaneous. Here was the living, breathing, epitome of the supremely self-assured alpha male. It put her on the warpath.

"Into town," she answered, in a cool, clipped voice. "No law against it, is there?" She had only just arrived and was already into a skirmish.

"You didn't see one written up on the signpost, did you?"

Nyree swallowed a ready retort. Obviously he was a personage in this one-horse town. "So what now? Why have you stopped me?" She was demanding an answer. Was aggression an antidote to panic?

"Maybe because it seemed to me you were about to fall over," he said, studying her petite figure with those extraordinary eyes. "That looks like a heavy suitcase you're lugging."

"Tell me about it!" she burst out in irritation and frustration.

"Stay calm, Rapunzel," he said dryly.

"I beg your pardon!" To her horror, involuntary tears sprang to her eyes. No one was allowed to call her Rapunzel. Her father had used to call her Rapunzel when she was a child, with a long tumble of fair hair—much blonder than it was now.

He was taken aback by the sudden glitter of tears. They got under his skin much like an injection from a needle. "Sometimes the sun can get to you if you're new up here," he offered in a kinder tone. "You are new, aren't you?"

"Does it matter?" She gave him a no-nonsense, challenging look.

"Of course it does." He moved nearer.

Her heart jumped and she fell back a pace. "You like to keep tabs on everyone, do you?" She was obliged to tilt her chin because he was so tall. "Maybe you'd be so kind as to tell me where I can find a cab?"

"Where do you want to go?" He stood still, studying her. Head to toe. Nothing sexual in it. More as he would study a recalcitrant child.

"I wasn't asking you." She knew she was being very ungracious. But this man offered a threat to her psyche, if his powerful effect on her was anything to go by.

"You'd better accept my help if you want to get out of here," he suggested in a crisper tone.

"What about some information instead? Who are you?"

"This is so sad." He gave a mock groan. "You don't know me."

"I don't know if I want to know you," Nyree snapped, wondering where this was heading. She was acting so out of character. She was usually a pleasant person. What was the matter with her? A touch of sunstroke?

"Brant Hollister," he introduced himself. "And you are?"

She gave a gasp, her real shock hidden under irony. "Brant Hollister! Give me a minute to take that in. Tell me, do I genuflect?"

"You can skip it for today." His eyes narrowed. "What say you get in the car? Your cheeks are all flushed. I can drive you wherever you want to go."

She needed to have her head examined—because she made a move towards the big Mercedes. "What if I said Alice Springs?" she asked facetiously. Alice Springs was dead centre of the huge continent.

"You don't want to go to Alice Springs this time of year. You'd bake." He held the door for her. "I'll put your suitcase in the boot."

"Shouldn't I ask for some ID?" She looked up at him. God, he was stunning—in his forceful male way. She recognised it, but she was quite prepared to leave it at that. She definitely didn't feel at ease with him—though just from looking at him she recognised the fact he was unq
uestionably a gentleman.

"Too late!" he said mildly, and closed the door.

As soon as he started the car, state-of-the-art air conditioning kicked in.

"Oh, that's lovely!" she burst out in an ecstasy of coolness, putting her two hands under the damp hair at her nape.

"At least something's good," he returned dryly. "So where to, Ms—?" He shot her a glance that held more than a touch of intrigue.

"Allcott," she said. "Nyree Allcott."

It was his turn to startle her. He gave a disbelieving laugh. "Not Howie Allcott's great-niece?"

She swung her head, her neck at a haughty angle. "Howie was a buddy of yours?" She objected to the

quality of his laugh.

"Howie was everyone's buddy," he said dryly. "Especially at the pub. Don't, for the love of God, tell me he left you the farm?"

There was a pain in her chest a bit like heartburn. "I'm delighted you didn't already know."

"Especially as he made me a promise he would sell out to us," he shot back.

That kept her silent for all of two seconds. "All hearsay," she remarked. "He's dead, so he can't confirm or deny it. The farm is mine, Mr Hollister. His will says so."

"You're going to work it?" he asked, with obvious sarcasm. "You surely don't want me to take you there?"

"Yes. Unless it would take all day and all night," she replied sweetly. "How far away is it?"

"It's not a question of how far." His answer was short. "It's more a question of dropping you off at a derelict old farmhouse that only rampant vegetation is propping up."

"You want to nab it all the same," she pointed out, with swift malice.

"We want to knock it down," he corrected, with a clash of his fine white teeth.

"Well, I don't!" she came back at him sternly.

"That's great—terrific!" he said in disgust. "How old are you anyway? Sixteen? Seventeen?"

"I'm nineteen, if you must know," she corrected him wrathfully.

"Really?" He didn't look impressed. "You knew the old codger?"

"I met the old codger once, at my grandfather's funeral," she told him in a fever of hostility. "It seems as though my grandmother was right. He was the black sheep of the family."

"Oh, I wouldn't rate Howie as that. He liked the drink too much, and it was his ruination. Somewhere along the line life for Howie took a dark turn. But he was a very fine painter."

"Just not good at looking after houses," she said, unable to stifle the note of regret.

"No. I can safely say Howie never lifted a finger to do anything around the place. As you will see. No mowing. No slashing. No gardening. No maintenance. Once in a while he got one of his ladies in to do a bit of washing up, Hoovering—that kind of thing. So you'll have lots of tall thick grass. Lots of snakes. You seem such a polished little miss I don't know that you could possibly cope."

"A polished, stubborn little miss," she amended, perversely pleased with the "polished". "Anyway, I'm not so little. I'm five-four."

"Maybe when you're standing on a box. I'd say five-three at the outside, and I'm spot-on with measurements. So, what do you do for a living, Nyree? Obviously I can't use the name Rapunzel for fear of reprisals."

"No, you can't." She looked steadily out of the window at the lush green landscape. Cuban Royal palms were lining the roadway with many coloured oleanders—pink, white, yellow, apricot and all shades of red. The air conditioning was picking up the delicious perfume.

"I think it makes you sad."

"I'm surprised you noticed." And she was. Very much. He was a bit of a mix. Arrogant, mocking, but perceptive, maybe even kind.

"Don't want to tell me?" He shot her another look, noting the swan's neck and the riot of curls. She must have been the prettiest baby in the world. She still looked little more than a child if not for the knock-out sexy punch—and he wasn't blind.

"No. I don't expect you to understand."

"How can I when you won't try me?" He employed a reasonable tone.

"What is it you want, Mr Hollister?" She hated the faint tremor in her voice. "Friendship? To get me on side? Talk me into selling the farm?"

"I think the state of the farm will do that, Nyree. In fact, I'm damned if I'll take you there."

To her shock he pulled off the road, then switched off the engine.

"Where are your parents?" His strongly marked brows drew together.

She threw up her head, readying herself for defiance. "None of your business." He was making her uncharacteristically aggressive, but she couldn't seem to stop it.

"Are they dead?"

God! Could he see her tragic chaotic past in her eyes? "I don't need any pity, much less comfort, thank you very much, Mr Hollister."

"Come off it. Brant will do. So who do you have? What about this grandmother?"

Nyree was surprised into a moan. "She doesn't want me. Never did. My parents were killed in a car crash coming home from a concert when I was thirteen. After that I went to live with my paternal grandparents. My grandfather died a year later. Just gave up the ghost. Can't say I blame him. My grandmother shoved me off to boarding school just down the road. She didn't want a child ruining her day."

"So you've got issues?" he said quietly.

"Haven't you?" she retaliated.

"Hey, what about dropping the hostile tone?" This was one imperious young lady.

Suddenly Nyree was ashamed. "I swear it's not like me. Maybe you're rubbing me up the wrong way?"

"Maybe we're doing it to each other. What if I take you back to my house?"

She laughed. "Are you serious? You're inviting me to stay with you?"

"I'm single, but it's not a bachelor pad," he told her dryly.

"You're still single? A catch like you?" She opened her lustrous eyes wide. "I'm amazed."

"You were expecting I had a dozen kids?"

"Not impossible. Turn the car back on, Mr Hollister. I'm not a party girl."

Now he gave a genuine laugh. "I have to tell you, Ms Allcott, you sure don't look it."

"Oh. How do I look?" She touched her hot cheek. What a fool thing to ask. It had just popped out.

"Hardly more than a schoolgirl," he told her repressively. Wiser to think of her that way.

"Well, I have to tell you I'm at university. I intend to become a child psychologist. A good one."

"So you're going for the big picture? But all in good time. So you'll be going back to Brisbane?"

"Don't sound so hopeful. I'm going to put the farm to rights. Then I might enroll at Cook to finish my degree."

"I admire your ambition." He switched on the ignition. "Let me take you back home with me. My grandmother is there. My mother and father have been divorced for years now. My mother has remarried. She couldn't take the way Dad is—never at home. He has a frenetic lifestyle, and of course he's a workaholic. He's in Singapore at the moment, on business, then Beijing. We might see him for Christmas."

His right-hand flicker indicated he was about to make a U-turn. Heart pounding, she laid an urgent hand on his. "Stop."

Skin on skin. Yet she might have been stripped to the bone! Unnerved, she made a soft, involuntary mewing sound that might have come out of a frightened kitten. Nothing in her nineteen years had prepared her for an electrical charge on contact. Her whole body was flashing sparks.

"I want to go to the farm." She made her tone even more combatant, fearing she was losing all connection with her former safe world. "If you don't want to take me, I'll wait for a cab."

He raised his brows. "What—here? Right here?"

She looked about. They appeared to have left
civilisation behind. The stupidity of it made her flush deeper. "Take me back into town."

"You're making a big mistake, Ms Nyree Allcott."

She didn't cave in. "So? I'm perfectly within my rights. Have you any idea how much this means to me? Have you?" She was betrayed into showing high emotion. "Of course you don't. You've led a charmed life. I expect everyone dotes on you. Apple of your grandmother's eye. Your father's heir and right-hand man."

"You've been reading up on me." He looked directly into her brilliant eyes.

"I've been reading up on your father," she said scornfully. She certainly wasn't going to tell him that he, the son, had received serious mention.

It didn't appear to bother him in the least. "Look, if it will make you happy I'll run you out to the farm. Let you see what condition it's in. Then I'll take you home with me. You can stay for a few days while I get someone in to do some heavy slashing. Do you know anything about snakes?"

"I've never met one," she said facetiously, pleased he had given in.

"You'll see your first in under a minute, once we arrive at the farm."

That shut her up like a clam.

CHAPTER THREE

HE DROVE slowly down an unsealed road which continued for about half a mile before turning off at a

fork. Nyree peered around her. Huge trees were trailing some kind of epiphyte: long curly plants like moss. It was growing so thickly she thought in a fading light it would look quite ghostly. It was gothic enough now, in broad daylight. Surely this sort of stuff decorated trees in the Southern States of America?

"Gosh, what is this? Frog's Hollow?" she asked.

"Not far off. Starting to get cold feet?"

"You wish!" As though she'd admit it. "What's the name of the farm? Does it have one?"

"Hey, you hit it in one. It's Frog's Hollow."

"It isn't."

"Why so astonished? Actually, it's Belguardo. The original owners of the sugar plantation—the farm has lost a lot of land since then—were the Pascolis. They're long gone. The two sons left when the sugar industry hit big reversals. The homestead was quite splendid in its day, I believe. There are photographs. But Great-Uncle Howie let it fall down around his ears."

"How tragic!" she mourned. Just what sort of a man had Great-Uncle Howie been?

"It is, in its way," he said. "On the other hand, who needs a mansion way off in the wilds?"

"I do," she proclaimed flatly.

He shot her mutinous profile a glance. "Then you're asking for trouble."

"From you?"

"Fiery little thing, aren't you?"

"I have Italian blood," she said, proud of it. Secretly she was thrilled with the farm's Italian connection.

"So that's it," he said. "The golden skin and the dark eyes. I'm not sure if I'm game to ask if you bleach your hair." He was certain she didn't, but he wanted to see her take the bait.

She did. "Suppose you just check these roots." She tipped her head sideways for his inspection. "You've checked everything else."

"I have to say not much escapes me," he laughed. "Actually, though your tawny colouring is fairly rare, I have seen it before—in northern Italy. I've seen a lot of the world."

"I bet!" She spoke as if it marked him as a pleasure-seeking, self-indulgent globetrotter. "I haven't even seen the Great Barrier Reef."

"If you're especially good I can fix that." He gave her a smile that was all sardonic dazzle and danger.

"Why? Have you got a big yacht?"

"Big enough to take you sailing." He realised he was deliberately trying to provoke her, just for the reaction. "Of course if you can't swim there's always the Lady Ashlee II, named after my mother. It's the family speed yacht. Australian-built, like a lot of the world's top yachts. A hundred and forty-eight footer. She can travel at twenty-nine knots."

"How modest," she said sweetly.

"Well, I guess there are some modest billionaires, but not my dad. The Lady Ashlee is a great boat. Great lines. Tons of space. We've had wonderful times aboard her."

"You take your girlfriends?" He was sure to have women falling over themselves for him.

"Not one of them doesn't love it. Now, what about your boyfriends?"

"Friends, thank you. I don't have a particular boyfriend."

"Now, how could that be, young Nyree?" He slanted her a mocking glance.

"I wish you wouldn't patronise me. I told you I'm nineteen."

"And that's an answer?"

"Oh, shut up."

On the fork road it got a whole lot bumpier. She guessed in the wet season, which was due to begin, the track would become hazardous.

"And Great-Uncle Howard lived out here?" she marvelled.

"When he wasn't dossing down in town. You realise when the rains come you'd need a four-wheel drive to get in and out? Any little cheap car and you'd do the back end in. Even a four-wheel drive wouldn't have a chance in a flood."

"I can see that. I'm not stupid," she said severely.

"Just foolhardy. Tell me, do you consider yourself a good driver?"

"I think I am." Though she wasn't so hot on reverse parking.

He made a jeering little sound. "You've barely had time to find out."

That infuriated her. Never in her life had she met anyone who could so get under her skin. Worse, it had been immediate.

"What the heck are those grey veils hanging off the trees?' she asked, twisting her head.

"Don't you know? Spanish moss."

"Thought it was. I wasn't expecting it around here. More Gone with the Wind sort of stuff."

"Lots of it grows in the district. Someone must have brought it in. It thrives in a tropical climate with high humidity. It gets its nutrients from the air and from rainfall. Actually, it's not really a moss at all. It's part of the bromeliad family. My grandmother is something of an authority on tropical plants and flowers. Very well known in her circle. She's had a number of books published. Though that was years back."

"Really?" She approved of the note of pride in his voice. "How interesting. What's her name? I might know of her. I'm very interested in tropical plants and flowers myself. I lived with—" She broke off, afraid to speak of Miss Em without becoming emotional.

"Go on. You lived with—?" She'd said she didn't have a boyfriend, but did she? A lover? She might look very young and virginal, but she was extremely beautiful, with a sexual aura she hadn't a hope in hell of hiding.

"A great lady who was very kind to me," Nyree managed after a pause. "We shared that great interest. She had many books on flowers, tropical flora, and flower paintings all over the house. She passed away recently. I can't bear to speak of it just yet."

"I understand. I'm sorry."

The dark flow of his voice soothed her. He sounded sincere. "Does your grandmother write under Hollister, or does she use her maiden name?" She quickly changed the subject.

"As a matter of fact she does. Alena—"

"I know," Nyree burst out, delighted. "Don't tell me. Alena Kalenin?"

He nodded. "She's at home. Want to meet her?"

"I'd be honoured to meet her," Nyree said, stunned by the connection. "That's amazing! I've always had an idea she was Russian?" That would explain his cheekbones and the exotic look. Genetics.

"Russian descent," he said. "Her father, Andrei—my great-grandfather—was a Russian aristocrat in the employ of the last tragic Czar, Nicholas II. Andrei just managed to get his family out before the Bolshevik revolution. They had to leave everything, including their estates. They arrived in Paris penniless. Over the years they moved from Paris to London. My Hollister grandfather actually met my grandmother in Hong Kong. They were married within a month. The rest is history."

"But that's fascinating!" She was much intrigued. "And Grandfather Hollister?"

"He died several years ago," he said briefly. "He and Alena had a good life together." He too changed the subject. "So, who was your 'great lady'?"

"Professor Emilia Scott. Miss Em." She swallowed the hard lump in her throat. "She was Principal of Swinton College for Girls. I went there from age five to seventeen. Does that clarify things for you?"

"Now, now!" He tutted. "No need to get your back up again. Could I ask if you're expecting any boyfriends—excuse me—male friends to come visiting?"

"Listen, I have enough on my plate without complicating life."

"You must have a hard time beating want-to-be boyfriends off," he remarked dryly. "Or perhaps you freeze them out?"

She knew he was trying to take the mickey out of her. "Well, freezing you out would be a pleasure."

"Wishful thinking, young Nyree." He laughed. "You sound like you crave your own company?"

"I like my own space, yes."

A self-immured Rapunzel, perhaps? "So, what's hiding behind the defences?" He shot her a searching glance.

"Nothing that need matter to you," she returned tartly, and looked away.

Her new home was jungle. He hadn't been exaggerating. The homestead was almost invisible beneath an incredible burden of tropical vegetation gone mad. Parasitic tropical plants had taken over, revelling in their undisputed ownership: figs, bougainvillaea, ferns great and small, pandanus, heliconias, gingers, crepe myrtles, hibiscus. Real mosses clung to the rising front steps and adhered to timber balustrades covered in a gorgeous display of flowering vines.

“Gosh!’ she said in an awed trance, raising her eyes to the corrugated iron roof.

Beautiful orchids were bursting out of the broken guttering, white with golden throats. On the ground, cymbidiums ruled the roost. She had never seen a display so magnificent. Certainly not in the open ground. Generally they were grown in pots. Cascading down the massive fig that acted as a flying buttress for the house were purple dendrobiums, the state flower, hardier than she had imagined possible. She had often bought a small bunc
h of them, four or five stems with a little bit of fern, for over six dollars. In this one place alone there was enough to stock a dozen florists.

“Well, are you game to get out?” He had been watching her carefully, attracted by the picture she presented. She was like a flower herself. But, boy, did she have her prickly little thorns!

“I am if you are,” she said hardily. “Do you think those steps will hold us?”

“Difficult to tell. Come on, then. Let’s get it over.” Outside the car, he bent to pick up a small fallen branch, beating the grass with it before pitching it into a great thicket of Bird of Paradise which had spread out all over. “Don’t stand there looking bewitched with your strange deserted house. I guess you can take one look inside.”

“Thank you so much.” She joined him, looking around almost furtively. Her first impression was of a haunted house, or the witch’s abode in a fairytale. Her second was of massive neglect. Lots of windowpanes were cracked, some missing altogether. The air was a luminous light green. Like incense. Spooky. She was almost afraid to call out, Anyone at home? Someone might answer.

Brave as she tried to be, she found herself almost shrinking against him. Now she could fully appreciate his height and strength. “It’s a wonder Great-Uncle Howie didn’t get strangled by all the plants as he slept. Oh, look—look!” Before their eyes fluttered an enormous blue butterfly, its upper wings a marvellous iridescent blue with black margins. It was huge!

“Ulysses,” he said casually. “You’ll see plenty of butterflies up here. They love the lantana. Come along, now. Shall I hold your hand?”

She was determined not to touch him again and set off the fire crackers. “I’m sure I can manage without,” she said, putting on a spurt of pace and bravado. She danced up the rickety steps, grateful they held beneath her weight. At the top she gave a shriek. “Oh, my gosh!”

He was with her in seconds, sweeping her off her feet.

Brant didn’t find it difficult. She was a featherweight. “Relax. That’s a common ordinary garden snake.”

“You’ve checked, have you?” she asked shakily. “It’s disappeared.”

He laughed. He was really enjoying himself. “Like me to carry you over the threshold?”

“Don’t be an idiot.” Her heart was pounding so hard in her chest she thought it might jump into her throat.

“Don’t say that to your groom,” he warned.

Something about her appearance had been teasing him. Now he knew what it was. His grandmother had a very valuable oil painting hanging in her bedroom—an Alma Tadema. It was in his famous classical style. Ms Nyree Allcott might have posed for him, with her masses of light hair, small classic features, great dark eyes and all. The thought made him smile into her face, dark eyes wary, cheeks aglow.

Just a smile, but it pierced Nyree like an arrow. She was terrified. It wasn’t as though for all her talk she hadn’t enjoyed many a mild flirtation. She hadn’t as yet broken her vow—no sex before marriage—but she

knew what it was to be hotly desired. Now she was feeling pretty darn hot herself. It simply wouldn't do. It was foolish and embarrassing. And he was the enemy. Most probably he was prepared to do anything to get her to sell up and get out. Who knew what was in anyone's mind? Who knew their real intent?

While she was speculating, he pushed open the front door, holding her all the while. She might have been a neatly wrapped package.

"No key?" Her voice sounded as agitated as she felt.

"No key," he confirmed. "Hard to keep anything out. Nothing worth stealing." Taking his time about it, he lowered her to her feet. "You won't have any electricity. It will have been turned off."

"Haven't you ever heard of candles?" she asked, doing another impersonation of her grandmother.

"I dread to think of a fire."

So did she. "So, can we look around?"

"Why ask me, Ms Allcott? You're the owner."

"Indeed I am," she said, with the greatest satisfaction. "There's no future whatever in your trying to get rid of me. I'm here to stay."

He lifted a mocking brow. "I'll be amazed if you stay one night." As he spoke he began walking before her, to check things out. "Would you like to wait here a minute?"

"No, I wouldn't!" She was keeping the powerful friction between them going. "You must know some very timid women?"

"I'd say they all know how to protect themselves better than you," he returned crisply.

"On the contrary, Miss Em was proud of me." She stalked after him. "She said I have all the brains, the commitment and the backbone that's needed to make a success of my life."

"I'm sorry I didn't meet Miss Em." He caught sight of an enormous but harmless spider. Even as he looked, it disappeared into the woodwork. "But she doesn't know what you're taking on now."

"Miss Em would be disgusted you're trying to take this house from me," she said wrathfully, instinctively following his gaze upward. "What are you looking at?" Just as she said it something snaked around her leg. "Oh, my God!' she moaned, her whole body freezing.

He spun, his dynamic face showing a flash of real concern. It swiftly abated. "For crying out loud! It's not a lion. It's a cat."

She exhaled noisily, glancing down at the ugliest, most battered moggie she had ever seen. "You poor old thing!" she cried, reaching down to lift the piteously meowing cat into her arms. "Poor old girl!" she crooned, then her head flew up as she gazed accusingly at Brant Hollister. "Is this Great-Uncle Howie's cat?"

He held up defensive hands. "Forgive me, Ms Allcott, I wouldn't know. It's obviously not feral. It knows the house, so I would have to guess, yes. Don't think it will have starved." He moved close in to make his own inspection, gently scratching behind the cat's ear. "Plenty of things for a cat to eat. There must be hundreds if not thousands of mice."

"Do you mind?"

"Frightened of mice too?" His turquoise eyes sparkled with outright mischief.

"Most women are. I'd sooner face a Doberman than a mouse."

"Don't worry. A Doberman might just turn up." He knew of two to fit the bill. Jupiter and Juno—splendid guard dogs.

There was a rustling noise from the top of the timber staircase. The both looked up—Nyree, it had to be admitted, on the fearful side. Not so the cat. It sprang abruptly out of her arms and sped up the stairs towards the sound.

"Probably birds," Brant said, thinking Ms Nyree Allcott was too young to be on her own in the world. Young, but gallant. Feisty too. What was her story? Plenty of tragedy, by the sounds of it.

"It's not going to kill a bird, is it?" she asked, staring back at him, her heart in her eyes.

"Cats do, young Nyree."

"So they do," she lamented—then fired up, as he'd expected. "Listen, I'm a woman, not a kid. Certainly not young Nyree."

"Great. Terrific. You're a woman." The hell of it was, she was! A God-sent beautiful young woman. Brant's will-power gave way. He shot an arm around her waist, pulling her towards him.

"Don't you dare touch me!" she said, fire in her eyes.

"I am touching you." There was amusement not lust in his gaze.

"Kiss me, I meant," she clarified sternly.

"My dear Ms Allcott, I'd rather kiss the cat."

She never did get a word of disgust out, because he did something truly astounding. He cupped her face with one hand, fingers closing around her chin, then lowered his dark head…

She was swamped—temporarily at sea….

It was just the fiercest, sweetest, most terrifying kiss of her life. A chastening, not to say punishing kiss. And it burned her. It burned her mouth. It boiled her blood. It sent bright sparks and shooting sizzles along the network of her veins. An enormous lassitude came over her. She was losing all strength in her limbs. She thought she clutched at him. Sh
e wasn't sure. The momentum of excitement had reduced her to a captive.

One kiss to open a Pandora's box! One kiss to make a woman burn!

When he finally released her she shook her head violently to clear it. Curly tendrils of hair sprang Medusa-like to frame her dazed and dazzled face. "How could you do such a thing?" she gasped.

"Don't be silly." He tucked a long curl behind her ear. "I'm absolutely certain that wasn't your first kiss."

"I don't remember inviting it!" A rosy blush mantled her cheeks.

He gave that a moment's consideration. "I'm not sure that's true, Nyree. Think about it. You've been provoking me from the first minute.'

"Provoking you, is it?" She was all the more furious because the charge was true. She had known all along she was pushing the boundaries.

He nodded. “Anyway, don’t worry about it. You never know—it might change your attitude.”

“Which is what?” She was feeling so shaky and strange.

“Hostile, antagonistic, wary. Want me to go on?’

“And you wonder why?” She swept on, not waiting for his answer. “I’m not afraid of you, Brant Hollister. I can stand up to you. No matter what you do.”

He saw the determination in her face, the strength of character that no doubt had helped her survive tragedy and emotional deprivation. “What I’m thinking of doing, God help me, is quite weird. In fact it’s only just occurred to me. I could build you a brand new house some place else. Somewhere you’d be safe. I’m sure we could arrive at some agreement.”

“And wouldn’t that suit you?” she scoffed. “I don’t need a brand-new house. I have this.”

The atmosphere between them from the word go had been charged with an edgy tension that was, at its core, sexual. Brant was forced to confront the fact. Ms Nyree Allcott had arrived without warning out of nowhere! How much easier it would be to deal with an older woman. Not this beautiful displaced nineteen-year-old girl. It shocked him, but he realised he was battling to keep his hard head above water.

You shouldn’t have kissed her. No excuses.

He could only cite a sudden storm of desire. That was the reality of it.

There was a ten-year gap between Ms Nyree Allcott and himself. He had packed a lot of living into those ten years, whereas—let’s face it—she wasn’t all that long out of the classroom.

You shouldn’t have kissed her, his inner voice repeated.

Except she had an aura unlike any other young woman he had ever met.

“So you’re serious about staying up here?” he said, glancing over to where she was standing.

Was she? Great-Uncle Howard’s legacy offered her independence.

Take him up on the offer. Nyree’s voice of caution spoke up. You can’t stay here by yourself. It’s too isolated. Too lonely. It’s probably haunted. And it’s falling down.

“I am serious about staying, Mr Hollister—” The decision was made.

He broke in, an edge to his tone. “If you call me Mr Hollister again, I’ll throw all caution to the wind and kiss you again.”

Her heart shook. “No way!” She was weak under the bravado.

“Better think again.”

Her chaotic feelings were making her so nervous. The ambivalence! He fascinated her—irritating her one minute, seducing her the next. “I am staying—Brant.” She didn’t think of it as caving in. More as good common sense. “You can’t know what owning a house of my own feels like. I’m going to fix this place up.”

She gazed about her, ignoring all the horrendous things. The rooms were big and light and airy. The hallway ran from back to front, which would allow every available breeze to flow through the house. The

woodwork appeared to be in reasonably good condition, although the parquet of the entrance hall was severely damaged in places. The ceilings were ornately plastered. There were rather elaborate architraves and moulded cornices. A chandelier that once would have been splendid was dark grey, caked with dust.

"Howie leave you a fortune, did he?" he was asking sardonically.

"How do you know he didn't keep his money under the bed?" she retorted, not about to tell him of Miss Em's additional legacy. "But then, I suppose you checked?"

"God forbid! You do rave on, don't you?"

She dropped her eyes, so he wouldn't see her flurry of emotions. "Only with some people."

"Let's keep moving."

When she could catch her breath. Why had he kissed her? To dominate her? Subdue her? Exploit her? God, she wanted to hit him. This man was a threat to her. She wasn't going to allow him to jeopardise her chances of making a good life for herself here in this magical place. Her own private wild kingdom.

She realised she would have to fight hard. He was enormously charismatic, and far too rich. His sexual aura alone exerted a powerful grip. It was a terrible thing for a man to be so sexy. The merest physical contact caused considerable emotional turbulence. She was still pumping adrenalin.

Best to hate him, she decided. In a light-hearted kind of way. So much safer.

See you stick to it! said the voice in her head.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEY couldn't find the cat when it was time to leave, so Nyree left a bowl of long-life milk and another of dry cat food. She had found them in the pantry. At least Great-Uncle Howie had been feeding his cat.

It wasn't until they were well on their way back into town that she remembered the paintings. "What happened to Howie's paintings?" She sounded so suspicious it was as if Brant might have been responsible for spiriting them away.

"Search me!" He flicked her a glance. "You might ask his Number One girlfriend. He had an entourage. But Dolly led the pack. Dolly Dryer. She's quite a character, is Dolly. She owns and runs the Hibiscus Hut. It's a small but surprisingly good restaurant on the edge of town."

"The plot thickens. I suppose she fed Howie occasionally, or he would have died a whole lot sooner. But Dolly? What sort of name is that? I only know of Dolly Parton."

"I'm not sure what Dolly is short for," he said lazily. "Maybe it's not short for anything."

"What the heck was Great-Uncle Howie?" Nyree asked. "All these women. He sounds like a sultan with his harem."

"The Sultan of Hollister!" Brant gave an enigmatic laugh. "He would have been a very handsome man in his time. He was a great talker. Extremely well read. A cultured man. A lot going on under the surface, but he never spoke of it. Loneliness—guilt, possibly. Who knows? He was a great drinker, of course. Again a way of forgetting. He was forever falling off his stool at the pub. Mostly he did it as a joke. He liked to play the clown—which he most decidedly was not."

"You sound as though you liked him?" She swung her head in surprise.

"I did. Very much when he was sober. The tragedy was Howard Allcott ruined his life. He had a real gift,

but he was self-destructive. He rarely spoke about his family until very recently. We knew he had a brother who died years back. Then all of a sudden there was talk of a great-niece. Obviously you. He never kept in touch?"

She shook her head regretfully. "Harems were in. Great-nieces were out."

"So your inheritance came right out of the blue?"

"Yes." She stared out at the glorious blue sky with never a cloud. "I think blue is the right colour. Blue is for happiness." His eyes were an extraordinary mix of blue and green—a genuine turquoise. "What happened to the furniture? Presumably there was more than we saw? At least at one stage. And the paintings, of course. Paintings first. I love paintings," she exclaimed passionately.

He already knew to scrape the surface and see her passions run deep. "You could have stepped out of one yourself." He knew his grandmother would be as intrigued as he was by her wonderfully paintable appearance, and her resemblance to the toga-clad young woman in the Alma Tadema. Not to mention her connection to Howard Allcott, a figure from his grandmother's past.

"No point in buttering me up, Mr Holl—I mean Brant." Nyree fell back on a strict tone. "Great-Uncle Howard really did make you a promise he'd sell to you?"

There was a half-smile on his face. "Well, the project wouldn't have gone up in smoke if he hadn't—but, yes, he did."

"So I'm in the way?"

"To an extent," he agreed. "I should warn you Dolly had expectations too. We bought up all the other old farms."

"Dolly did?" She swung her head, dismayed.

He nodded.

"Maybe he treated her badly, then?" Nyree started to worry.

"Never!" Brant shook his head emphatically, certain Dolly had taken the paintings off the wall. "The only person Howie treated badly was himself."

"Thank God for that!" Nyree released a pent-up breath. "No doubt DHH offered a good price to the others?" She made it sound like a challenge.

"That goes without saying. We live here, young Nyree. We operate mostly in the North. Our reputation for fair dealing is very important to us."

"I expected you to say that. This project, then, it must be enormous?"

"It will be big—and the best."

"The biggest and the bestest! So, hypothetically speaking, where would you relocate me?" she asked sweetly.

"A stone's throw away." His reply was terse. "Then I can keep an eye on you."

"But how extraordinary! I don't need you to keep an eye on me." Automatically she bridled. "Anyone would think you've appointed yourself my minder."

"Well, you're here with me now," he countered. "You got in the car of your own free will. You've

graciously consented to coming back to my house. You do need to keep me on-side."

Her cheeks flushed. True. "Only because you own the town. And probably the whole damned district, plus a few of the offshore islands."

"I'm afraid so," he said, and laughed. "You don't really want to go back there, do you, Nyree?"

Now his v
oice had sunk to the most beguiling level. "Don't waste your valuable time trying to charm me. I'm determined to stay at the farm. You can help. You have legions in your employ. Get a few people in to help me clean the house. Groundsmen to take care of a fair section of the grounds. I promise you, you won't know the place by the time I'm finished."

He stretched out a hand to tap her shoulder. More sparks flew. "Well, you'd better finish before the cyclone hits," he warned. "You saw the state of the roof."

"So? It can be repaired." Roof? Cyclone? That was demoralising.

"Certainly. But you'll be in thrall to the workmen for a very long time."

Nyree swallowed. "You're not really expecting a cyclone. Are you?"

"Matter of fact, we are. We haven't had a good one in quite a while. We're about due. They go in cycles."

"I didn't know there was a good cyclone," she said. "You're just trying to frighten me."

His eyes gleamed. "Be afraid. Be very afraid, young Nyree," he mocked. "Though I guess it's useless trying to frighten feisty ole you. I am, however, giving you the facts. Tropical cyclones are a fact of life. The cyclone season is coming up. Sometimes the anticipation of one can be unbearable. The humidity and the heat. You've heard of going troppo? It happens. The electrical storms alone would be enough to make you jump out of your skin."

"We do have them in Brisbane," she pointed out loftily. "Anyway, I'm not the type to hide under the bed in a storm."

"Our storms are a whole lot meaner," he said. "Remember you've crossed the Tropic of Capricorn. I'd hate to think of you alone at the farm."

"Now, that's a comfort! Don't think I don't appreciate it. Are you going to ring ahead to let your grandmother know you're bringing me back with you? I don't really rate as a guest."

The smile was seductive. "My dear Ms Allcott, I'll ensure they run out the red carpet. But first I'm going to feed you." He slanted a glance over her petite frame. "You must be hungry. I just hope you're not anorexic."

"That's ridiculous. I eat well. I don't look anorexic, do I?" Once more she was trapped into begging a response.

"Just joking. Actually, you glow with health."

"I got lucky! A compliment."

Then he spoilt it. "It's not all good. You must have hollow legs, because you're no weight at all. I hope you're hungry?"

"I think I can swallow something," she said, turning her face away. "And I really want to meet Great-Uncle Howie's paramour. She must be a good age?"

“Sex appeal is ageless,” he said. “Didn’t you know?”

“I haven’t exactly seen too many sexy septuagenarians,’ she said, from the lofty plateau of her nineteen years.

“I’m not sure you understand what sexy means. It doesn’t just mean being young and gorgeous.” He aimed a brilliant glance at her.

“You can’t mean me!” She offered a laughing disclaimer. “Not the gorgeous bit, anyway. My grandmother couldn’t abide my looks.”

So she had grown up totally without vanity? “I do mean you,” he clipped off. She wasn’t fishing for a compliment. At some stage young Nyree Allcott’s life must have been hell.

“Well, I know I don’t look ordinary” she amended, surprised by his sharpened tone. “No more than you do. My father and mother thought I was the most beautiful child in the whole wide world. I’m just saying my grandmother as good as threw me out of the house largely because of my looks. I’m the image of my mother.”

Brant couldn’t control a hot flash of anger at this grandmother. “And this is bad?”

She turned her head. “I don’t want to talk about it. My grandmother adored her only son. She hated the woman he married.”

“Now, that, Nyree, is seriously sick!’

“It happens.” She shrugged. “I didn’t take after my father. I’m my mother.”

“Then you’re a very lucky girl. I wouldn’t worry myself with anything your grandmother might have thought or said in the past, Nyree. I’m only glad you got lucky with Miss Em. What was the Em short for again? Don’t tell me—Emilia?”

“She wanted me to call her that, but I thought it wasn’t respectful enough. I hit on Miss Em and we left it at that.”

“So Miss Em’s gain was your grandmother’s loss?”

“Bitterness defined my grandmother,” Nyree said, her voice full of sad regret. “Nothing I ever did pleased her. I was much better off at boarding school. Afterwards Miss Em took me in. I miss her terribly.”

“Of course you do,” he said. “But all the good times will return, and you have the happy memories. The love you felt for Miss Em will survive.”

Nyree couldn’t reply. She was afraid of bursting into tears. Nevertheless a wave of comfort swept her. Sometimes he could say the right thing!

There was a single parking spot right outside the Hibiscus Hut. He nosed the big Mercedes into it and then turned off the ignition. Nyree put her hand to her rioting hair. “I’d like to freshen up first. I can’t have a skerrick of lipstick left.” She flashed him a glance that clearly allotted him the blame.

“Do you really need it?” Her full mouth was beautiful, a natural rose.

“Of course I do. Men didn’t know anything about anything. Without a bit of make-up I really do look like a kid.”

“But a very pretty one. The powder room is at the rear. To the left. I’ll organise a table. See if Dolly is in

today."

From the outside the Hibiscus Hut looked amazingly attractive. A beautifully designed retractable awning in a deep emerald and white striped canvas stretched out over the footpath and offered shade. To either side of the glass-doored entrance glazed green pots with a magnificent display of orchids spilling out of them were ranged.

Inside, the air-conditioning came as a welcome relief from the humid heat. Dolly, if she had done the decorating herself, had a real eye for style. The palette she had selected suited the tropical North perfectly: lime, aqua, turquoise, plenty of white. The glass-topped tables were surrounded by finely woven rattan chairs, with the fabric on the cushions picking up the colour scheme. But what took Nyree's attention after an initial sweeping glance were the beautiful paintings hanging on the wall. Paintings she immediately fell in love with.

Fiercely she clutched Brant's arm. "You have to believe me—I'm a bit psychic—but I know some of those paintings are Great-Uncle Howie's work."

He took her hand and held it tight. "I can't claim to be psychic, Nyree, not even a bit but, yes, a good few are Howie's work. They stand out. Dolly probably took them for safekeeping." Like hell she did, he thought, knowing he would have to do something about it.

"And put them up on her wall?" Her eyes had gone huge.

"It looks that way. Go tidy yourself up. I'll see if she's here."

She frowned at him and snatched away her hand. "Only my hair isn't tidy," she pointed out angrily, then stalked off. He wasn't some older cousin she had hero-worshipped since childhood. Hero-worship meant some lack in oneself. He was Brant Hollister. The enemy.

And don't you forget it!

Gosh, she was lucky to have that voice in her head.

In the well-appointed powder room she combed her hair, then arranged it in the classic knot that suited her to a tee. Several splashes of cold water on her face, then a touch of lipgloss. Staring into the mirror, she realised she looked good. Full of a lust for life! This really was an adventure. It was exciting, but a bit of a torture to know she would be seeing a lot of Brant Hollister. Under different circumstances she would have liked to have him on-side as a good and powerful friend. Heck, it was even looking that way right now.

When she returned to the main room she saw him standing in conversation with a tall, striking brunette, a little on the lush side. A silky waterfall of hair spilled down her back. Nyree couldn't yet see the colour of her eyes, but the young w
oman was immaculately dressed in a white linen sleeveless shirt and skirt.

Their conversation appeared so intent the voice in her head started up again: Maybe they're madly in love with each other?

Oh, shut up. Very oddly, some of her confidence evaporated.

But you know nothing about him. He's much older than you. An experienced man of the world. He's probably had dozens of women by now. She looks like she's known him her whole life.

She did. It was there in the body language. Now the woman's hand, wrist encircled by two splendid gold bracelets, had moved to his arm, clung.

Don't interrupt them.

Why not?

Just a word of warning.

She couldn't hang around there. Other diners had broken off their murmured conversations to look up and smile at her. At the same time they were taking her in. Very likely wondering who she was. She had come in with Brant Hollister. That alone would ensure attention. Still, the locals seemed a friendly lot.

Nyree threaded her way to Brant Hollister's side, conscious her outfit was way too casual, especially if seen beside the statuesque brunette's. Of course he would be attracted to a tall woman—not a pint-sizer like her.

"Ah, Nyree. There you are!"

Sure enough, he extended his arm fully to shepherd her in.

The brunette turned about with a practised smile on her face. Nyree, intuitive to the nth degree, saw she had to fight to keep it in place.

She hates you on sight. Not good, Nyree girl.

Brant made introductions, his tone suggesting Nyree might well be a visiting relative of whom he was fond.

Lana Bennett scrutinised her closely. Tip to foot. "So here you are!" she exclaimed brightly, for all the change that had overtaken her expression. Up close she was even more attractive, with fine poreless skin, even features, and marked black brows over light blue eyes. "We'd just about ruled out the possibility your great-uncle had any family to speak of."

"As you say, here I am." Nyree gave Brant's woman a sunny smile. "And I'm here to stay."

"Surely not?" Lana Bennett's expression said, Oh, my God! "A young girl like you? You couldn't possibly live at that derelict farmhouse. Certainly not by yourself."

"Why not?" Nyree kept a charming smile in place. "I'm looking on this as a great adventure. I intend to do the farmhouse up. And I'm going to get myself two big guard dogs," she confided. "Rottweilers, maybe. Or German Shepherds—Dobermans, that kind of thing. Good company."

"She's joking, isn't she?" Lana, who appeared to be breathing a little harder, turned to Brant for confirmation.

"Don't ask him," Nyree insisted. "His name is Hollister."

Lana's blue eyes turned to ice. "I beg your pardon?"

"He may be the most splendid person in the world to you, Ms Bennett, but we both know he wants the farm. My farm."

"And you think trying to make a home for yourself out there is better?" Lana asked incredulously, a disapproving frown in position.

"You don't have to answer that, Nyree," Brant broke in smoothly. "Why don't you sit down?" He pulled out a chair for her. It was a wonder he didn't press her into it. "We won't keep you now, Lana." He turned back to his friend. "You told me you had many things to do. So, see you tonight." He bent his dark head to brush the cheek she proffered.

A token kiss, Nyree decided, watching. Just an air peck, really. Was she his girlfriend? Lana Bennett definitely thought so. And they were meeting up that night!

"Nice to meet you," Nyree piped up from her chair, playing the good just-out-of schoolgirl role he seemed determined to cast her in.

"If you need any help, call me," Lana Bennett told her crisply. "Brant will give you my phone number."

"Thank you so much," Nyree responded, knowing she wasn't going to be calling Ms Bennett any time soon.

"Your girlfriend doesn't like me," Nyree leaned across the table to whisper.

"What's not to like?" he answered nonchalantly. "Lana is a close friend. I've known her all my life. She's not my girlfriend."

"But you're close? You can tell me how close. I won't tell anyone else."

"What are you going to have?" He ignored her question, picking up the menu. "The seafood is local. Always superb."

"Let's talk about the paintings," she said, still whispering. So many people had smiled and waved to him. He was the North's Crown Prince. "Where's Dolly?"

"She hasn't come in yet," he said. "Why don't you let me handle this for you?"

"You don't think I can handle it myself?"

"You should watch that temper of yours," he told her, busy checking the menu.

"I didn't know I had one until I met you."

"Which is only today." His eyes glittered, mocking.

She sat back in wonderment. "You're right! Now, isn't that strange?" She realised she was behaving as though he had always been in her life. So, for that matter, was he.

"Strange indeed," he agreed, pinning her startled gaze. He wasn't about to tell her he had been drawn to her at first sight. "Now, what about some seared scallops in the white truffle sauce to start. Then I recommend the barramundi. Can't do better. Or maybe the Red Emperor. Both superb reef fish."

"Don't encourage me unless you're paying," she said, picking up her own menu. "I'm not some little cousin from Brisbane."

"You might as well be. I'm so enjoying your company." He gave her a lazy smile, though she swore she saw something flare at the back of those turquoise eyes.

"You don't have to pretend you like me," she warned.

"Why should I pretend?"

A waitress zoomed in on them, an infatuated smile on her pretty face. And why not? "I'm awake to your wicked wiles. I know what you're playing at."

"Then you know a damned sight more than I do," he returned bluntly.

They had finished a delicious meal and were drinking coffee—amazingly good—when…enter a gypsy woman! A bodacious woman. She really should have been heralded by a ripple of flamenco music, Nyree thought. She was maybe on the wrong side of sixty, but she was amazingly colourful, with real presence. A silk scarf was arranged gypsy fashion over her forehead and tied back over a plethora of dyed ebony waves and curls. Big gold hoops swung from her ears. Real gold, judging from their lustre. She wore a scarlet blouse tucked into a skirt printed with brilliant tropical flowers gone wild. Lots of baubles that picked up the various colours were draped over her exuberant chest, tumbling into her still remarkable cleavage.

Maybe that was how she came by her name, Nyree thought, dazzled by the theatrical entrance. It couldn't be anyone else but Dolly—her late great-uncle's long-term lover. What a woman! She had swept in like the Queen of the Gypsies, and she was heading directly for them. Brant stood up as she sailed majestically towards their table.

"Brant, my darling, how lovely to see you!" The voice was a lush contralto. The words were more sung than spoken. She planted a kiss fair and square on his handsome mouth. "And this beautiful little lady is…?" Black kohl-enhanced eyes surveyed Nyree with extreme interest. "Isn't she a little young?" She gave Brant a hard nudge in the ribs, laughing with real enjoyment.

When she finds out she'll tell you to go away. Go on. Beat it!

"A little surprise in store for you, Dolly," Brant said, looking very much as if he wanted to laugh right back. "This is Nyree Allcott—Howard's great-niece."

Dolly gaped at him as if he'd gone crazy, then back at Nyree. "It can't be."

Nyree came respectfully to her feet. "It is, Ms—" God, she'd nearly said Parton. "Great-Uncle Howard left me the farm. He left me his paintings too. I see you've very kindly looked after them for me by hanging them on your walls. Thank you so much."

That astute but diplomatic little speech gave Dolly no cheer. Her attitude turned confrontational. She swung her head Brant's way, setting the gold hoops in motion. He pulled out a chair for her. "I hung them on the wall, my dear," Dolly announced when she was settled, "because they're mine. Howard owed me."

C'mon!

Brant eyed her. "Unfortunately, Dolly, he didn't put them in your name before he died. You've only just hung them up, surely? They weren't there a fortnight ago, when I was last in."

Nyree, with her tender heart, interrupted. "You wanted the room to look beautiful, didn't you, Ms Dryer?" Miraculously she dredged up the name. "I had no idea he was such a wonderful artist."

Dolly covered eyes black as night with such a heavily be-ringed hand Nyree started to count them. "He could have been a big name!" she burst out in an operatic lament. "He was in so much pain. His only way of letting it out was his painting. Poor Howie!"

Nyree quickly shifted to the adjoining chair. "You loved him, didn't you?" she said very gently, taking Dolly's hand.

Dolly lifted her head, her be-ringed fingers curling around and cutting into Nyree's with long painted nails. "You're a nice child," she crooned. "I did love Howard. But he didn't love me. He didn't love anyone. It wasn't that he was cruel. He wasn't. Some woman had stolen his heart. Left him bereaved and without one. Maybe someone who looked like you?" Black brows knotted, she stared intently into Nyree's face. "You have the sort of face a man never forgets. The sort to launch a thousand ships. Maybe your grandmother?" Dolly's hand tightened, as though she could wring the answer out of her.

"Not my grandmother, Dolly," Nyree said, vaguely shocked. "Take my word for it. Not even my grandad loved her."

"But you've got two grandmothers, child," Dolly persisted. It was as if at long last she had set foot on a hitherto undiscovered track.

"Please—I didn't know the other one, Dolly,"
Nyree said, looking anxiously to Brant for support. Slowly she managed to remove her crushed hand.

"How can that be?" Dolly demanded, rolling her kohl-lined eyes to the ceiling.

Brant intervened. "Nyree hasn't had an easy life, Dolly," he said. "She lost her parents not all that many years ago. I'm sure when you two get to know one another she'll tell you more. But for now, what about the paintings? They are Nyree's. Howie left them to her. It's all legal. And Nyree loves paintings."

"Why wouldn't she? Look at her. She's a Donatello angel!" Dolly cried, throwing up her hands.

"I would love to give you one, Dolly." Nyree hit on a solution, lured in by this strange, bold woman. "The one you love best. Or two, if you can't decide between one and the other."

Knowing Dolly, a tough-nosed businesswoman, Brant had been expecting the mother of all histrionic displays. Instead young Nyree appeared to be reeling her in.

Dolly scrunched up eyes that were working sure and fast. "Do you think I could have the big canvas on the back wall?" she asked, reaching for Nyree's hand. "I would miss it dreadfully if you took it away. Howard painted it during our best year together."

Nyree flashed a glance at Brant. His striking face gave nothing away. No help there. "You mean the big island landscape between the silver leaf sconces?"

Dolly nodded. "I was lying naked beside him when he painted it," she lied. "Of course I was in better shape then."

Brant laughed. He couldn't help himself. To counteract that, Nyree answered Dolly kindly. "Of course you may have it, Dolly. I may call you Dolly?"

"It's really Delilah," Dolly confided, lying yet again. She smiled, showing one gold-capped tooth. "I was very beautiful when I was young. I stopped being Delilah around forty-five, when I started to lose the first flush of youth. Sure enough Howie took it upon himself to rename me Dolly. So Dolly I became." Her black eyes made a full circuit of the dining room. "If you could find it in your kind sensitive heart—one so young—I'd also like the abstract—Pearl in the Ocean."

Now Brant chose his moment to speak up. Pearl in the Ocean was arguably Howard Allcott's finest abstract work. "I'm sorry, Dolly, but the abstract spoke to Nyree the minute we walked in. Didn't it, Nyree?" He slanted a speaking glance at her, daring her to deny it.

He was spot-on. "I really love it, Dolly," Nyree said, enormously grateful Dolly hadn't settled on it as her first choice. "Can you not choose another?"

"I believe Dolly will be very happy with the Orchid Island landscape," Brant said, leaning back comfortably in his rattan chair.

Even Nyree could see that his brilliant turquoise eyes said, And that's all you're going to get!

Brant knew, if Nyree didn't, that Dolly had amassed quite a few of Howie's paintings over the years, without really asking. She wasn't about to take the pick of them from Howie's young heiress.

Day one and he had squared up perfectly as Ms Nyree Allcott's protector. Clearly her youth and inexperience had got to him. He didn't want to think about her other kind of impact on him. This

tremendous urge to touch. Hell, he wasn't a vulnerable man. He managed his emotions extremely well. But this young woman's sexual aura, innocent or not, was both dizzying and disarming. Add to that, he really liked her. It was a whole combination of things he had never experienced before.

CHAPTER FIVE

BACK on the leaf-canopied street, with the tropical sun blazing down on them and troops of tourists jamming the sidewalks, he walked towards a tall timber hat stand that had been strategically placed outside a gift shop. The stand was decorated with an amazing display of straw hats, caps and hand-printed scarves—clearly for the tourists to buy.

"Come along. Come along," he said, as Nyree dawdled. "You'll be needing one of these."

"Yes, Cousin Brant." She matched her tone to a goofy expression.

He laughed, then after a moment's hesitation picked one out. "Try this on."

"You've got good taste," she said. She would have picked that one herself.

"Of course I have. Brilliant taste. Here—take it."

"I do have hats, you know." She took the ultra-wide-brimmed straw hat, soft and floppy, from him, twirling it with pleasure. One side was weighed down with silk hibiscus in burnished shades of yellow and orange. She knew it would suit her and her colouring.

"I'm sure you could do with another one," he said. "Put it on."

"You know what? You're a bully." She settled the enormously flattering straw hat on her head, then gave him a smile. "How do I look?" She tipped her head this way and that, an unconscious coquette.

A man could go to hell and back for a smile like that, he thought, experiencing a solid jab to the heart. It was the first real smile she had given him.

"Brant?" she said uncertainly. He had such a strange expression his face.

"That's fine. You'll do," he said briskly. "Wait here while I pay for it."

"Don't you dare!" She began to rummage in her tote.

"Pay me later," he said, moving away from her into the shop.

They'd turned in to Coral Fields Estate. Obviously an estate at the very top end of the market. And why not? Spectacular luxury homes sat facing a sea of incredible blue, the water glittering crystal-clear in the shallows so one could see the white sand.

"To think people like me don't have to pay a penny to enjoy such a glorious view!" she exclaimed, staring out enraptured as the Mercedes cruised the long upward drive. "Do you have a beach?" Excitedly she turned her head.

Everything about her was getting to him. They weren't easing into some kind of friendship. They had made an instant powerful connection. Mysterious were the ways of a man with a woman.

"Of course we have a beach—very private. You'll love it. It's a good thing you have olive skin. Not that you'll be able to go without sunblock at any time."

"You're going to make a great hands-on dad," she said, going back to staring out. "No need to tell me which house is yours."

"They're all mine, in a way," he said casually. "I designed the lot of them. I'm an architect."

"So you are!" She applauded him. "And an engineer. I'm very impressed."

"As you should be. It took infinite hours of hard work, study and work experience from the bottom up. I needed to have an overall view of operations."

"Well, I have to say you look like you have limitless reserves of energy," she told him sweetly, peering ahead. "That's your place right at the top, isn't it?"

A splendid house stood on a promontory between two pristine secluded bays. She could see the shimmering white sand, fringed with magnificent tree ferns, and coconut palms growing at extraordinary angles, a host of cabbage tree palms.

"It looks enormous! Napoleon and his army could lose themselves there."

"Napoleon who?" he joked. "The house was built with many functions in mind. My grandmother lives with us. She has what is virtually her own house. As do I. As does my dad—when he's home. We're together but apart. If you know what I mean. It's the way we all like it. We're a very close-knit family, but Dad and I don't need to have Alena right under our nose."

"Just like me?" she scoffed cheekily. "Your much-loved grandmother must be in her seventies." How lucky, lucky, lucky he was to have one! "Would she have known Great-Uncle Howard?" She swung her caramel head, nursing her new hat in her lap as if it were precious.

"Alena knows everyone," he responded without expression. "She knew Howard Allcott quite well. He painted her portrait."

"Wh-a-t?" That piece of information floored her.

"And did a wonderful job of it," he said, ignoring her little screech. "My grandfather commissioned it. Alena was at the height of her beauty."

"I don't believe this,"
she said with immense disgust. "Why didn't you tell me before? There's a connection."

"So there is," he said flatly.

It was more like a great enclave than a house, Nyree thought, studying the front façade. It appeared as more a series of sculptural interlocking villas than one house, each villa standing three storeys high, each complementing the other marvellously. Nyree was speechless. She had never seen anything like it. No wonder he thought the farmhouse was only fit to be knocked down.

"I've used a reinforced concrete construction everywhere," he said, amused by her ever-changing expressions. "The house will withstand the fiercest cyclone."

"I bet!" Instantly her brain conjured up a great hurricane of unbridled ferocity, the storm lashing the sea at the foot of the great bulwark of a house to a fury. "You must be very proud of it," she said in an awed voice. "You're so clever!"

"Now, there's a surprise! Something about me you like."

She flushed. "I admire your gifts. I didn't say I liked you personally. No, wait. That's very ungracious. I do appreciate what you're doing."

"Which is?"

"Why, taking me in, of course. Just a night or two—until we can get people in to tidy up the farm," she added hastily. "This is an extraordinary place. It suits you. Just like the farm suits me. It's mine!"

"It's really scheduled for demolition."

"No way!" She shook her head. "It's like I said. Having a place of my own means a great deal to me."

"It might come as a shock to you, but I do understand. Now, come inside."

He stretched out a hand. Excitement started up again. Wonder of wonders, she gave herself up to it. Life, she was finding, had become a real adventure.

"Where are you going to put me?" she asked as they walked through massive double doors giving on to a marble-floored space large enough to hold a ball. "I'm sure your broom closet is bigger than the farmhouse."

"What broom closet?" he said. "We have guest suites. People are always staying with us. Many overseas visitors, friends, business associates. I have a suite in mind for you."

"That's what's so interesting about you." She stared up at him. "You're always a step ahead. Make that a mile. When do I get to meet your grandmother? I'd like to look better than this." She gazed down at herself, not happy with her casual outfit. Miss Em, always beautifully turned out, had liked her to look pretty. "Clearly she's a great lady."

"That she is," Brant confirmed. "She actually has a title, if she cared to use it—which she never has. Not that I can remember anyway. She's the Countess Alena."

"Gosh, there must be a story in that!" Nyree gasped.

"A very sad story in parts, Nyree," he said. "She may tell you one day. She has her own personal maid who's been with her for twenty years. Her name's Jasmin—part-Chinese, part-Malaysian. You'll like her. As for you, you'll do fine. You'll meet Alena pre-dinner. She's not as strong as she used to be. She has a heart condition—not major, but her health is carefully monitored. Dad and I don't want to lose her. She said she's not going anywhere until I'm happily married."

"Then you'd better get a move on, hadn't you?" Nyree responded sweetly.

"How do you know I haven't got the right woman in mind?" he asked, focusing his attention on her.

"Gee, I bet she loves you to bits."

"We'll just have to wait it out and see. By the way, we'll be having a few other people to dinner."

Nyree showed her dismay. "Now you tell me! I'll eat in the kitchen." She already had confirmation that Lana Bennett was going to be one of them.

"Joke, is it?" he asked.

She angled a glance at him, throwing back her head to do so. "If I'm around you a day longer I'll have to invest in some killer heels."

He made a jeering sound. "Wouldn't you be a tiny bit scared you'd topple over? Anyway, you must have packed a pretty dress?"

Nyree stared at him. “Give me a break. I came up here to work. I only brought rags.”

“As if I believe that. The outfit you’ve got on is kind of chic. Or you make it chic. I don’t mean really dress up, like Cinderella at the ball. Just a pretty dress, okay?”

She surprised herself by closing her fingers tightly around his wrist. “Listen, I don’t really want to join your little dinner party, Brant. I don’t know anyone.”

“You want to meet people, don’t you?” he countered.

“Sure. I’ve met the adorable Lana. Is she the woman you’re waiting for?”

“It’s really not your business, Ms Allcott.” He looked down at her delicate hand with its tapering fingers, an enigmatic smile on his face.

“How right you are!” She took her hand away, hopefully without blushing. “I just can’t help being curious.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You try to pick out something nice and—”

“Well, I do have…I only meant…”

“Kindly allow me to get in a word. I want you to join us. My grandmother will be expecting you. Ten people in all. Not a crowd. And when I’ve settled on the right woman I promise I’ll let you know. That’s if you don’t sell up before Christmas and head back home.”

Her dark eyes flashed. “I’m not selling, Brant Hollister. Let’s be very clear about that. I dare say your path has been strewn with successes, but you’re going to fail with me.”

“Am I?” he softly mocked.

“I’ve given you notice.” She spoke haughtily.

“What you lack in inches you make up for in voice projection. I can only ask who taught you that particular tone? The grandmother, right?”

It took Nyree a full minute before she could answer. “My grandmother makes me sound like Mother Teresa. Now and again I do employ her tone…”

“Well, I never!”

“And don’t laugh,” she said sternly. “I’m one serious person. I do Miss Em as well. But Miss Em was a true lady.”

“And you’re a great mimic,” he said, looking entertained. “Think you can amuse yourself this afternoon? I have appointments to keep.”

“Of course I can,” she retorted, vexed. “I’ll go down to the beach.”

“Take sunblock, and don’t go in far in the sea, though the bay is safe. You can swim?”

“Do you know anyone who can’t?” she asked caustically.

“Lana can’t,” he answered mildly. “Not well, anyway. She’s strangely averse to getting her hair wet. But don’t say anything. She might get upset.”

Immediately Nyree adopted the lotus flower position, bending her tawny head. “Your wish is my

command, O Lord and Master!”

She had fully expected Brant would travel to his appointments in the Mercedes, or maybe the Range Rover she had spotted. Instead he took off in a Bell helicopter from a helipad in the grounds.

“Gadzooks!” she cried—one of Miss Em’s expressions. She stared upwards as the helicopter lifted into the intense blue sky, rotors whirring. A helicopter. A yacht. Surely there was a Lear jet tucked away somewhere? Maybe his dad had taken it on his business trip.

Her own accommodation was far more luxurious than the best five-star hotel. Brant had settled her in what was called the Topaz Suite. Apparently there was an Emerald Suite, a Turquoise Suite and an Amethyst Suite, which he said he would show her when he had time. There were servants. He called them household staff. A major-domo—Vincent—a very pleasant man, and his equally pleasant and attractive wife Gina, fiftyish, who was in charge of running the household. Both were obviously of Italian extraction. Gina had her own staff too, who all appeared to be Asian—probably Vietnamese. So, a league of nations.

Everyone smiled. Everyone appeared happy. Why wouldn’t they in such a splendid house set like a jewel in its glorious environment?

The Topaz Suite was huge—the topaz coming from the colour of the silk bedspread, the cushions and the upholstery on the daybed. The colour was picked up again in the South East Asian rugs that were scattered across the golden polished timber floor. There were no curtains, only white shutters that could be folded away or adjusted as required. The adjoining bathroom was fantastic. It had a huge picture window that looked directly out over the bay, the view framed by golden timber cupboards with open shelving that held lovely thick towels, bath mats, and all manner of bath salts, lotions, potions, body creams, fragrant soaps.

But what captured her attention way beyond the beauty, the space and the luxury of the suite was the painting in the bedroom that could be best viewed from the bed. It was a large oil on canvas, depicting a remarkable profusion of tropical flowers, giant leaves and ferns. The flowers dominated the canvas, but to the left was a view of a turquoise sea with a coral island rising out of it. To her stunned eye it was a tour de force.

She adored flower paintings. They were irresistible. They spoke a universal language. Her eye moved to the explosion of tropical orchids, lilies and liliums, hibiscus of incredible size, Torch Gingers, Strelitzias, some gorgeous flower she didn’t yet know, giant banana leaves, philodendron leaves. As specimens, they all looked so real she found herself putting out her hand as if she could touch them, inhale their heady scent. In the bottom right hand corner was a signature, in a small but beautiful script.

Howard Allcott.

That stopped her short. What on earth was going on here? Brant hadn’t been honest with her. Or not honest enough. What did it all mean? Her great-uncle had painted a portrait of his grandmother? She’d had no idea he had painted portraits. That was a very special skill.

And now this. She remained gazing at the painting for quite a while, her expression tender and sad, then she turned away, resolutely hunting out her bikinis. She had brought several—all nylon-Lycra. She might be petite, but she had just the right figure for a bikini. She intended going for a swim. The mysteries would have to wait.

Hair in a plait, she pulled on a cover-up, caught up her beach bag and her new hat, then made her way down through the house, across a grassy promontory to steps cut into the cliff face. The steps wer
e topped with granite blocks, and there was a hand rail to hold on to for safety.

Great buoyancy in her every movement, she jumped the last step onto the broad crescent of white sand that lay between her and the sea, that was glowing with a near neon luminosity and the tropical fluorescence. She stood still for a moment, filling her lungs with pure salt air. She couldn’t remember a time when she had felt so wonderfully carefree. This was heaven, and she didn’t have to pay for any of it.

When some of the jungle was cleared at the farmhouse she might have her own view of the sea.

Halleluiah! She had lived through hard times. Bring on the good!

That unforgettable afternoon she frolicked in the crystalline shallows. Exhilarated, she swam out until she couldn't touch the sea floor. Afterwards she did a little sunbathing, careful to apply lotion liberally beforehand. She could just imagine the comments she would have to endure should she acquire a pink peeling nose. Later she ambled along the foaming water's edge, exploring right down to the next bay, picking up some exquisite shells. The only footprints on the sand were hers and the sea gulls'. Hours slipped by before she began to think of collecting her things and making her leisurely return to the house.

The spirit of the place welcomed her. She could feel it in her bones. For the first time since she had lost Miss Em her spirits were soaring. Miss Em would approve. Miss Em had loved her.

By the time she reached the top of the cliff the wind was whipping at her hair, pulling it out of its plait, nearly stripping her cover-up from her. She had been on the beach for hours. It was almost sunset. She turned one more time to stare out over the sea. Less than an hour ago it had been the colour of precious stones: emerald, sapphire and sparkling aquamarine. Now it had turned to indigo. Layers upon layers of colour were invading the western sky. Mauves, yellows, pinks, lime-greens, and an unbelievable palette of crimsons, with the dipping sun blazing in all its glory on its journey down the horizon.

Never had the world seemed so clean and bright. It was wonderful to be at one with nature, with the heavens and the sea. She dropped her beach bag, careful to weigh down her hat, which had somehow become precious to her, while she stood in a near mystical trance. In front of her dazzled eyes it was as if the western sky caught fire! A conflagration of red and orange, rose and gold. Such beauty would lift anyone's mood.

"We call it the miracle hour," Brant's voice said from behind her.

Sexuality in sound waves. She spun like a dancer. It was staggering how familiar he seemed. How did one explain that? Their lives had barely touched, yet they had formed a connection that held a powerful physical component.

"Oh, you're home!" she exclaimed.

"Twenty minutes ago."

Brant allowed his eyes to move over her. She had at once the most innocent and the most seductive body he had ever seen. Small beautiful breasts, lovely limbs, glorious skin. In a matter of hours she had turned a sun-kissed pale gold.

"Enjoy yourself?" He kept his tone casual.

Did he really need to ask? She looked radiant. He had a mad impulse to fling out his arm and draw her into his embrace. Keep her there. He had never felt like that about a woman. Come to that, he had never really known what it was to be intoxicated by a woman's beauty and bright, endearing personality. Now Ms Nyree Allcott, all of nineteen, had entered his life, instantly altering it.

You're letting your senses get the upper hand.

God, yes. Hadn't he wanted her in two minutes flat? What was even more extraordinary, it felt perfectly natural. As if it was meant to be. It was enough to take a man's breath away.

"I've had a perfectly beautiful afternoon," she answered him, in a soft reverent voice. "This is my kind of place. A dream of paradise! No wonder artists are attracted to the tropics. I've never see a more magnificent sunset. The sun is way down on the horizon, but it's so glorious, so dazzling, it's lighting up the entire sky."

He spoke gently. “Stay with me and you’ll see many more.” He couldn’t retrieve the words. They had sprung from the depths of him. In their way, dynamite stuff.

“Aren’t you sweet?” She managed to answer calmly enough, even though something inside her began to ache to belong. To really belong! It was her dream. “When the jungle is cleared I’ll have my own view at the farm,” she said, trying to cover a moment of high emotion. “I know it can’t possibly match this—this is an absolutely perfect uninterrupted view of the sea and the not so distant islands—but only billionaires can afford this little lot.”

“We’re aware how fortunate we are.” He smiled, and the smile stayed in his brilliant turquoise eyes. “So, what have you chosen to wear this evening?” An arm around her shoulder, he turned her back towards the house.

“I don’t think I’ll tell you.” All of a sudden she wanted to hold on to him for dear life. Never let him go. Just being with him felt tremendously good. “I’ll make it a surprise.”

She had known him a day. She had known him all her life.

Nyree was making her way downstairs when she saw Brant hastening towards her. He was wearing a very stylish beige linen suit and an open-necked navy shirt with a cream stripe.

“You look beautiful.” He kept his tone light. In actual fact she looked exquisite, in a light-as-a-breeze floral dress that hung from spaghetti straps. The bodice cupped her small breasts, flowed close to her body to her ankles, showing off high-heeled gold sandals. All that beautiful skin on show. The dress was amazingly pretty, yet he guessed it would have been inexpensive. She had style. One either had it or didn’t. Money couldn’t buy it. Obviously she had shampooed the salt out of her hair. It sprang up and away from her small face in a gleaming, sinuous mane.

“Pass muster, then, do I?” There was challenge in her lustrous dark eyes.

“Okay—you look ravishing,” he conceded.

“And you look madly, dashingly attractive—even if we are on opposite sides of the fence. Come to escort me down to dinner? That’s a surprise.”

“I love it when you’re nice to me.” He slanted her an amused glance. “It so happens Alena wants to meet you before the others arrive.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Nyree looked down at herself. Her outfit was pretty—it was a great pattern—but no way would it hold up against what she guessed the Countess and the female guests would be wearing. Always needing to give people labels, she had already secretly identified Brant’s grandmother in her mind as the Contessa.

“There’s absolutely no need to be nervous,” he said. “Come along.” He held out his hand.

Quiet fell over her.

Alena Kalenin—Hollister—was nothing like Nyree had expected. She had imagined from Brant’s height that the Countess would be a tall woman, rather like Miss Em. Spare, elegant, commanding.

The lady that confronted her, seated in an armchair more like a throne which dwarfed her, was tiny!

Nyree thought when standing even she would easily top her. Probably she had diminished with age. Which wasn’t to say she wasn’t immensely regal. She was. Her silver hair had been set to form a halo around a remarkably unlined parchment-textured face. She wore a long midnight-blue moiré silk dress and a glorious necklet of large pearls that sat perfectly within the high neckline. Her eyes were as dark as

Nyree's own. Dark and piercing beneath artfully tended high-arching black brows.

Her voice, when it came, was firm and precise—no sign of age—with an accent after long years still in place.

"Please, my dear, let me have a look at you—Howard's great-niece."

In such a presence—and the suite was mind-bogglingly Old World opulent as well—Nyree found herself dipping into a spontaneous little bob. "Good evening, Contessa," she said, moving forward. "It's an honour to meet you."

There was nothing whatsoever studied about her, Brant decided, standing quietly in the background. It was obvious their young guest had spoken from the heart. Indeed, she had shown for the first time in his hearing an acce
nt of her own in saying contessa. Of course—she had Italian blood. He wondered if she spoke the language, as he did.

"Eyes—the windows of the soul!" Alena pronounced, leaning forward in her chair and offering Nyree a tiny be-ringed hand, the wrist encircled by a magnificent diamond cuff. Diamond and sapphire pendants swung from the lobes of her ears. "Yours are so beautiful and so pure. You have come to the right people, Nyree. A lovely name. It suits you. I well remember a beautiful New Zealand actress called Nyree Dawn Porter. She played Irene in the Forsyte Saga. But that was way before your time. Whatever you wish to do, child, we will help you. Be assured of that. I see no trace of Howard in you. Your Italian blood is uppermost."

"On my mother's side, Contessa. My mother was very beautiful."

"As are you!" The Contessa threw up her tiny hands. "I wanted Brant to bring you to me so we could meet for the first time in private. We will talk later at length, if you would like that?"

"I would indeed." Nyree blushed. "Your grandson has been very kind to me, when he could easily have been otherwise."

"Not so!" The Contessa flashed her grandson such a spirited, loving, mischievous smile that Nyree immediately caught a glimpse of the great beauty of the Contessa's youth. The cheekbones were still there. The arched brows and the brilliant eyes.

"You see the resemblance to the girl in the Alma Tadema?" Brant asked.

"But of course!" his grandmother exclaimed. "Nyree's beauty is classic. And that hair! You may not believe this, Nyree," she confided, "but I once had hair to my waist. And such hair! Not all those wonderful waves and curls like yours, but straight—very thick and lustrous. My hair was as dark as my eyes. Tomorrow, perhaps, I'll show you the Alma Tadema."

"And my great-uncle's portrait of you?" Nyree begged. "I would love to see it. To see you!" The sincerity rang genuine.

"I'll think about it," Alena said slowly. "Now, I suppose we must go down to the guests. Nyree—I'll take your hand."

"Of course, Contessa." Nyree sprang to the Contessa's aid. In a very strange way it was like seeing Miss Em's ghost. The two women couldn't have been more dissimilar in appearance, but it seemed to Nyree they cast over her a similar mantle of womanly protectiveness.

His grandmother had made no move to correct Nyree over using her title, Brant observed, watching the

two of them bond so easily. Alena Hollister she might be to the rest of the world, Alena Kalenin for her books, but his grandmother had accepted Nyree's "Contessa" as her due. Of course his grandfather had often called her Countess if she sounded especially regal. It had been playful. But no one else outside of Nyree had attempted the same. Yet his grandmother seemed more than happy with Nyree's use of her long relinquished title.

CHAPTER SIX

"I THINK that'll do for today!" Dolly whipped out a huge red handkerchief and mopped her sweating brow. "Come on, ducky, stop now before you drop."

"I'm sorry I told you my nickname, Dolly," Nyree said, going to the back door and emptying her bucket into the ferns. Afterwards she washed her hands at the shining kitchen sink, dried them, then slumped wearily into a chair opposite Dolly.

They had been working all day, and now the two of them were spent. The "Big Heat" was mounting. The Weather Bureau was monitoring a cyclone off the coast of Fiji. The cyclone season was underway, with the town and the entire district making preparations for any possible onslaught.

"At least we're getting there," Nyree breathed with satisfaction. "I can't thank you enough, Dolly, for being so supportive."

"You're Howie's great-niece, aren't you?" Dolly said, pouring them both home-made lemonade and adding chunks of ice. "Besides, you're a real lovely kid."

"I'm a woman, Dolly," Nyree stressed. Would anyone see her as that? Was it her height? Or lack of it? Even the Contessa called her "child", though she must seem a child when the Contessa was approaching eighty.

"Not yet, sweetheart," Dolly said slyly. " I know a little virgin when I see one. Pure as the driven snow."

Well, even Dolly had been a virgin once. "That obvious, is it?" Nyree moaned.

"No greater allure for a man," Dolly pronounced in her lascivious contralto. "Brant has been taking a far more than kindly interest in you. Look at all the help he's given you. Staying at the big house. Meeting Alena. I've always been terribly, terribly jealous of her, you know," Dolly abruptly confided. "Haven't seen her for years. Is she still beautiful? Couldn't be. She must be eighty. Years older than me."

"Why would you be jealous, Dolly?" Nyree frowned her puzzlement.

"I was jealous of every woman Howie looked at," Dolly said, fixing Nyree with an intense gaze. "Especially in the early days. He was a very handsome man. The women fell for him in droves."

"Isn't that what hippies did? Fell for one another in droves? I've read about the big love-ins. But what does that have to do with the Contessa?" Nyree couldn't disguise her curiosity.

Dolly looked away guiltily, as though she'd been caught off guard. "Nothing. Nothing at all. He painted her portrait, you know."

Dolly had clearly decided to back off. "I haven't seen it as yet." Although she and the Contessa had become amazingly close over the past month, Nyree still hadn't been invited to see the portrait—and she hadn't had the temerity to ask again. She had, however, been shown the Alma Tadema in the Contessa's sumptuous bedroom, and noted the resemblance to herself.

"I only saw it the once. Even then I wasn't meant to." Dolly's painted red mouth stretched into a wry grimace. "I had to steal a look."

"So what are you implying? Great-Uncle Howard was in love with the Contessa?" Nyree's voice rose a full couple of tones.

"You and this Contessa bit!" Dolly retorted, looking incensed. "No one calls her that. Not even Howie. How did you get into it?"

"She is a Russian Countess, Dolly. That's why. She looks and acts like the true aristocrat she is. She's been in this country God knows how many years, yet she still retains a Russian accent. Brant has quite a look of her—those cheekbones that give him such an exotic air."

"Oh, he's exotic, all right!' Dolly cried, tempestous feelings unleashed. "If I was only thirty years younger I'd give that Lana Bennett a run for her money."

Nyree felt actual pain in her chest. "Brant says she's only a friend."

Dolly broke into a rich cackle. "Listen up, kiddo," she snorted. "Lana Bennett has gone most of her life believing one day she'll be Brant's wife. Struth, they were an item not all that long back. She told me herself."

"Maybe she was fantasising." Nyree clung tightly to the idea. "I've seen them together. Brant doesn't act in the least lover-like around her."

"It's money, my girl," Dolly said. "Money marries money. Don't you get that? Lana's dad has been in partnership with Brant's father on many a project. He's on the board of DHH. You're in the wrong dream, my darling, if you've got a hankering for Brant Hollister. You're too young and innocent for Brant. He likes a sophisticated woman."

"I don't think Lana is all that sophisticated," Nyree returned with spirit. "She's not terribly well read. She didn't even know the heroine's name in War and Peace. The last time I saw her—it was at a dinner party at the house—she told me I looked like a shampoo ad. Laughed while she said it. I thought her very rude."

Dolly twirled at the hair curling wildly around her ears. "Jealous." As she spoke, Dolly glanced at her watch. "You have a magnificent head of hair. As do I." She tossed back the rest of the lemonade, then rose to her feet, straightening her off-the-shoulder blouse. "Now, ducky, I'm off. I'm due at the restaurant tonight. A special fiftieth wedding anniversary dinner for old friends of mine. You're going to be all right here by yourself? I do wish you wouldn't do it, but all my efforts to stop you have failed."

Nyree pulled herself to her feet. "Stop worrying, Dolly. I have the dogs. They'd eat anyone who tried to do me harm."

"I'm sure glad I'm a friend." Dolly, who normally wasn't the least nervous around dogs, rolled her eyes.

They walked out onto the verandah and Juno and Jupiter, sleek Dobermans, rose to accompany them out to Dolly's four-wheel drive. Quarrelling lorikeets with their gorgeous display of plumage were bursting in and out of the grevillea blossom in an orgy of feeding.

Brant had insisted on bringing Juno and Jupiter over to act as Nyree's guard dogs. She had been powerless to stop him. It had appeared to be a condition of her staying at the farmhouse on her own. It had worked well. An animal lover, she was beginning to really enjoy their company. Though ferocious when on guard, they were proving affectionate companions.

She waved Dolly off—noticing she had a rather painful blister on her right forefinger—then stayed out on the verandah, surveying her wild kingdom. She loved it here—especially since miracles had been wrought. And it was all due to Brant. He gave the orders. Things happened. Not in due course. Right away. She knew in her heart he was only humouring her until such time as she chucked it in. But for now he was allowing her to have her little adventure. He had so much money it really didn't matter.

A great sweep of grass had been slashed and mown right around the house, protecting it from snakes. The rampant climbing morning glories had been pulled off the tall tank stands. The jungle was subdued, except for the wonderful bank upon bank of day lilies she absolutely loved. Brant had even sent a man to cut some of the branches of the great coral trees so she could have her view of the sea. The corrugated iron roof had been fixed, the orchids relocated in the pots and hanging baskets she kept on the verandah. The weatherboards had been repainted a soft moss-green, and most of its timber boards had been renewed, as had all the broken windowpanes and the timber shutters on the French doors, repainted pristine white, fixed securely in place.

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The temperature hadn't dropped. It looked very much as if they were in for an electrical storm, although the sky was still a dense but sultry blue. She rather liked thunderstorms. She had lived through plenty of them in sub-tropical Brisbane.

Towards dusk, she heard the sound of a vehicle coming down the private road. Quickly she bound her freshly washed hair in the delicate hair ornament the Contessa had given her: four fine gold loops encrusted with crystals that fitted over her head. It was quite beautiful, classical in design. Nyree treasured it because it had been a gift.

"Much like what the young girl in my Alma Tadema paintings is wearing," the Contessa had said. "I'd like you to have it."

It suited her so well Nyree had taken to wearing it much of the time, unaware the sparkling crystals were actually diamonds. It kept her hair bound, and away from her neck.

She wasn't expecting visitors—Brant was in Cairns for a few days on business, and it had made such a difference to her world—so she had pulled on a short blue and yellow patterned smock, not bothering with a bra in the humid heat.

The dogs gave the identity of the driver away. They went mad but in a welcoming way. It was Brant in the Range Rover! Excitement took wing. She had thought to set herself against him, yet in no time at all he had undermined all her defences.

You've got a job in front of you, girl. Brant Hollister is the last man in the world to fall in love with.

Why wasn't she listening to the voice of common sense?

She saw he was heading for the double car port at the sheltered side of the house. Since she had been under the shower the sky had changed to an extraordinary glittery gunmetal. Flocks of birds were flying overhead, homing in to their resting place, their screeching clear warning of the storm to come. The palm trees that had been waving their fronds stood motionless in the strange lull. It was like being in the eye of a storm. For the first time she got an inkling of the terrible power of storms this far north of Capricorn.

Swiftly she ran about, turning on a few lights. The interior of the house had turned gloomy, and she wanted him to see all the improvements she and Dolly had made.

He came up the short flight of front steps accompanied by the dogs, calling her name.

"I'm here—here," she announced, quickly running to the open doorway. "I thought you'd still be in Cairns?"

God, wasn't it wonderful to have him back? Not only was he part of her waking life, he had become part of her dreams. It was as though she was on the edge of some great revelation. Whether good or bad she had yet to find out.

"I'm here now," he retorted crisply. "I thought you told me you knew all about tropical storms? Your shutters should be closed."

"So, okay, I was about to shut them. And I'm well. Thanks for asking."

"First things first," he clipped out. "Put the dogs in the laundry. They hate storms. Then get cracking inside the house." He turned about and went back onto the verandah. "It'll be on us in another few minutes."

How right he was!

It began with dramatic suddenness. One minute there was an odd waiting silence, then hell broke loose.

"Oh, my God!" She rushed to his side and caught hold of his arm.

He put his arm around her waist and drew her close to him. "I hate you being out here in this isolated place," he said with a subdued rage. "I hate it. Alena hates it."

"Well, I love it!" Despite herself, her voice was shaky. The wind was roaring outside, as if monstrous howling wolves were trying to blow the house over. Its primal voice was rattling the strongly built shutters. The rain was coming down in a ferocious torrent, slanting in to the front of the house, crashing down like Victoria Falls on the iron roof. A flash of lightning, truly terrifying, lit up the interior like a film set. Brant had turned off the electricity. If the worst came to the worst she would have to rely on candles. There were stacks of them in the pantry.

Moments after the lightning came the thunder. It was loud enough to wake the dead. Nyree actually jumped, and his arm tightened around her.

"It's okay. I've seen a lot worse." He had to shout to be heard.

"How long will it last?" she shouted back, lifting her head to him, immensely grateful he was with her. She had seen plenty of storms, even the odd violent storm, but nothing to compare with the velocity and the sheer power of this! It was actually making her feel ill.

Just as Brant had feared, down came the hail. As they were later to find out, much of it was as large as golf balls, providing a temporary snow field. Hail smashed its way across the verandah, striking at the shutters. They held. The windows on one side of the house were still unprotected. Sure enough they heard a crack, sharp as a rifle shot, then the sound of breaking glass.

"Stay there," Brant ordered. The safest spot was the core of the house.

"I'm coming with you."

"Not in bare feet, you're not."

"I am too." In all truth she didn't want to be separated from him. Not for a moment. It was like being under fire on a field of battle.

The broken window was in the smallest bedroom, the one least sheltered by the great mango tree. The curtains were sopping wet, blown back and torn. Glass fragments, glittering like diamond squares and triangles, lay all over the polished floor and the rug.

"Back to the other room," Brant waved her away, noting her pallor. "This will have to wait."

The romance of her wild kingdom had shown its turbulent face.

Fifteen minutes later it was all over. Just like that! Great arrows of sunlight were piercing the mushroomed cumulus clouds that were shot through with iridescent veins of silver, livid green and gold. Brant had gone out onto the verandah to open the shutters. Now a glorious blast of air heavily perfumed by

mountains of crushed blossom—jasmin, gardenia, ginger, frangipani and oleander—rushed into the house.

Nyree didn't venture out. She stood framed in the open doorway, brushing damp strands of hair away from her heated face. The grass was covered in hailstones, and there was shredded blossom everywhere, lying in rainbows against the ice. One of the palm trees had taken a lightning strike. The trunk was snapped off at an angle of forty-five degrees. There were circles of blue forming in the grey sky.

She put a finger into her ear. "I think I'm deaf."

"That was nothing," he said, returning to her, glad her bright colour had come back—although she was warily watching him, as though expecting a lecture. She had tried to remain stoic but she hadn't fooled him one bit. Not with his arm around her trembling body. The storm had frightened her—as well it might.

"Let's have a cup of coffee," he said.

"Good idea. My nerves are shot."

"I didn't think you'd admit to it."

"Pretending wouldn't work," she answered wryly.

"Not with my arm around you."

"Well, it was scary," she flashed.

"Give me a broom and I'll clean up the broken glass. The window will have to be patched up with a piece of plywood for the time being."

She took the broom out of the closet, then passed it to him. "There's plenty of unused timber out in the car port."

"I know."

To her infatuated eyes his stunning bone structure seemed more prominent than usual. Even his expression was a bit on the daunting side. "I'll make the coffee," she said, her nerves at an exquisite pitch.

"Let the dogs out first."

"Very well, Mr Hollister."

Later they sat in the living room, freshly painted her favourite yellow, with a high-gloss white trim. Great-Uncle Howard's Pearl in the Ocean took pride of place, dominating the room and adding tremendous panache to what was now a very inviting space.

"You've done wonders," he said, more tersely than he'd intended.

He knew she had style. She had done a great job turning much of the abandoned farm house back into an attractive home. But being with her, having his arm around her during the storm, holding her to him, conscious she was wearing very little under the pretty smock, was making even his iron control falter. Her attraction was so powerful it was all he could do to keep his hands off her. He knew he was judged by everyone—those who knew him, those who only knew of him as David Hollister's heir—to have everything he wanted. What he wanted was right here. He didn't want anything else as long as she stayed near. This was a rare moment for him—a moment of acute revelation.

Nyree set her coffee cup down, unnerved by his manner. "But you're angry, aren't you? Not pleased at all."

"What do you expect, Nyree?" He frowned. "First and foremost you're living a dream. An unsustainable dream."

Of course she was. But she wasn't ready to admit it. "Don't start, Brant," she said in quick defiance. "Please don't. I'm a bit on edge." A bit hardly said it. The atmosphere inside the house was as electric as any storm.

"You're not the only one," he felt forced to say. "What about me? I feel responsible for you."

She jumped up in a temper. "I don't need you to be responsible for me."

"That's ridiculous and you know it. I'm happy to do whatever you want."

"Anything to indulge me, you mean. You have so much money you don't care one way or the other. You think I'm just some poor deprived kid who should be allowed to play house."

"Well, aren't you?" He was acutely aware of the danger that was flying all around them. Hot passions mixed up with a supercharged sexual hostility. "You lost the parents you adored at a very vulnerable age. You had years with your ghastly grandmother until Miss Em stepped in to save you."

"Pop psychology!" she cried out in scorn.

He ignored her. "Then you lost your mentor. Howard's legacy has set you free—but only if you sell the damned place. Surely you can see that? We expected to acquire it when Howard died. You're right," he admitted tautly. "You've got me all confused—and I'm a guy who doesn't confuse easily. I am letting you play house. You know why? You and your history have got to me. Does that make you happy? It would have been so much easier to deal with an older woman, a settled person. These days I find myself ready to do anything you want, even though I know it's a kind of madness. I'm indulging you in what I know to be a fantasy."

He ran his fingers through his thick dark hair, betraying his agitation.

"What if I give you the villa that will be eventually built on this spot? It's going to happen. Some part of you must know that. The thing is, Nyree, you shouldn't be way out here on your own. Even with the dogs it's a tremendous worry. Word goes out. You've been seen in the town. Everyone is talking about Howie's beautiful great-niece. How long do you think it will take before you have uninvited callers?"

"Then they can clear off!" she cried with perverse fury, knowing he was absolutely right. "I'm quite safe with the dogs."

"Oh, yeah, you're a real Superwoman!" he snapped. "There are ways to subdue dogs," he added grimly.

So many drifters passed through the tourist towns. Men without ties, without women, without scruple. A beautiful young woman alone, unprotected. He couldn't live with it. Alena wanted it all to come to a halt. She had grown very fond of Nyree, often commenting on Nyree's broad range of interests—unusual in a young girl. Interests no doubt encouraged by her beloved Miss Em.

"You're paranoid, as far as I can see," Nyree announced wrathfully. It was all an act. Her heart was pumping away madly. She knew her position was untenable, but she'd be damned if she'd give in to him without a fight. "Absolutely paranoid!" She covered the living room with her arms crossed.

"Well, you can't see very far," he retorted bluntly, tracking her progress with his eyes. "You're not giving enough thought to this, Nyree. I don't want you here. It would be bad enough if Howie had left you a house in the town. But way out here…It's too isolated."

"Who says I have to have your p-permission?" She was so angry she was stuttering.

"I do," he said. "You wouldn't want me for an enemy."

"Is that a threat?" She looked at him, aghast.

"You know damned well it's not." He shot to his feet, uncharacteristically off balance. Her eyes were huge. Overbright. "You take all my help—"

"I've thanked you, haven't I?" she flung at him. "I'm tremendously grateful. What are you trying to do to me, Brant? Send me away? Because I'm telling you now, I'm not going!" She even stamped her foot.

"And I have no intention of leaving you here," he countered, moving towards her, a towering male figure. "Alena is worried about you. She told me to tell you to pack a bag and come back to the house," he said, in a quieter tone. "Cyclone Callie is forming in the Coral Sea. We're all on alert. It could live for as long as two or three weeks, and if it comes in it will come at great speed. If you think this afternoon's storm was bad, you won't want to be out here on your own during cyclonic weather—even if a cyclone doesn't hit."

The rational part of her was aware of all this, but she was beyond reason—at the mercy of her ungovernable emotions. She had never felt remotely like this in her life. "You want to control me utterly, don't you. Why?"

"Don't play the little fool," he ground out, feeling himself being pushed beyond his limits.

His vision was filled with her. His nostrils were inhaling with tortured delight the extraordinary scent of her. He had to gulp in air. Finally, out of all patience, he reached for her, hauling her into his arms.

"You've known what was on my mind since the very first day."

She flushed, the vivid memory of their first meeting streaking before her eyes. She was ready to faint with the yearning that threatened to engulf her. He filled up her whole field of vision.

"So you want me?" she cried. "You think I don't know? I'm all sorts of a fool, according to you, and yet you want me. What as? Some tawdry little affair? I'm not wife material. I'm too inexperienced—too stupid for you. No, I take that back. I'm far from stupid. I'm clever. I'm just not clever about you. That's where Lana Bennett comes in. It's the talk of the town."

"The hell it is!" He dismissed that in a fury. "You're the talk of the town. You know so much and yet you know nothing!"

"So tell me!" she shouted. A primitive rage, driven by this torrent of unresolved yearning, had taken hold of her. She was so agitated her whole body was throbbing.

"Why don't I just show you?" he ground out, his tone unbearably harsh.

In a blaze of action Brant swept her off her feet, knowing she was so shell shocked she could offer no resistance. She was such a featherweight he could have walked halfway across the world with her in his arms.

They were on the sofa…Her warm body was draped across his knees, her beautiful curly head tipped back into the crook of his shoulder, arching her throat. God, he adored her. How had it happened?

"Bravado one minute, silence the next." He spoke tersely. "You're a very complicated person, aren't you?"

"And you're not?" She tried to raise her head to defy him, only he swooped…

His first kiss literally sizzled across her mouth, leaving a trail of fire.

An experiment? Whatever had been intended, it had a galvanic effect. Her heart was beating inside and out, sensation expanding at such a rate she felt her whole body go into meltdown. His strong hands actually seemed to be melting through her skin to her bones. She went limp and alarmingly languorous. She couldn't have stood up even if she'd wanted to. All she could do was fall back with a helpless moan.

The next time he kissed her it went so deep she began to drown in a sea of sensation. She thought she locked her hand around his neck. She wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything. What did she know about sex and passion? He was taking her some place she had never been before…His hand moved down over the soft fabric of her smock, caressing her breasts through it, bringing her sensitive nipples to tight painful life. She couldn't disengage…her longing for this to continue was too fierce…it was wonderful and it was terrifying…like the effects of a dangerous stimulant.

His hand moved lower, down over her stomach, which quivered under the pressure, then abruptly he stopped—even though her knees were spreading in a movement that was totally involuntary. She wanted his fingers to enter her…she wanted it…longed for it…She had never known a lover, but more than anything in the world she wanted her first lover, her only lover, to be him.

Even so, she knew she was panicking…There was a good chance she would lose not only her virginity but her reason. Her reactions were astonishing to her…She wasn't herself at all. She was woman with man. Her first man. She was going to live the experience. Maybe die of sheer excitement.

"There's nothing to panic about." Brant's voice came in a swift undertone. "I'm only making love to you. A little."

A little?

Dear God, if this was a little, how would she withstand the real thing? Her whole body had flamed into life beneath his hands. Nothing could save her. She was losing herself, despite the very real worry that fluttered like a moth at the back of her mind. How far were they going? She wasn't prepared for sex. Yet his every kiss was taking her down deeper and deeper into a sensual whirlpool.

This was how it happened. Blind passion. Emotions out of control. Ecstasy mixed with fear.

You love him.

The voice in her head did nothing to soothe her extreme agitation. How was it possible she could love so deeply, so madly, a man she really didn't know? How could she abandon herself like this to his voluptuous lovemaking? She had curled herself into his aroused body, fitting herself to him, a sure manifestation of his power over her.

Brant drew in his breath sharply, wrenched himself sober, though his heart was banging painfully against his ribs and his powerful arousal was an agony. He was desperate to pick her up and carry her to her bedroom. Slam the door. Lock it. Make love to her for hours and hours. Leave his imprint. Make it so she would never forget him.

Only…only…He tried desperately to regain control…His body was demanding he take her—his sex drive sizzling its way along his arteries. But his mind told him he cou
ld never hurt her. Never, never, never! She was wise to trust him. He didn't know if that made him feel better or worse. His desire for her had grown with every passing minute of every passing day. Today that desire had all but brought him to his knees. His life, which for the most part had been all about business, was now focused on a woman. She didn't just arouse him sexually. Her well-being had come to mean everything to him.

He looked down at her, shaking his head a little from side to side in an effort to bounce away his driving desires. Her beautiful dark eyes were brimming with the tears of high emotion, breaking his heart and in the end reining him in.

"I'm sorry, Nyree." He picked up her hand and kissed it like some knight of old. "I'm sorry I frightened you. I'd never hurt you. You must know that."

"I do," she gasped. Her breasts were rising and falling in agitation. "I'm a virgin, Brant." She had to tell him. Warn him?

"I know. Girl into woman." He bent and took silvery teardrops into his mouth, willing his heartbeat to stabilise. "Come back to the house with me. Say you will. Put me out of my misery."

She stared into his eyes, seeing tiny flecks of gold in the brilliant turquoise. "I can't refuse you," she murmured finally.

She truly couldn't.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CYCLONE CALLIE, initiated as a cluster of thunderstorms over the Coral Sea, continued to hover out to sea. Either it would die there or it would cross the coast, bringing destructive winds and flooding. The region was on cyclone watch. Everyone hoped it wouldn't be upgraded to a cyclone warning. Either way, people were being given plenty of updates, through radio, television and the Weather Bureau in six different languages: English, four Asian, Italian.

Nyree had settled back into the big house, treated by everyone from the Contessa down as though she were family. It was the most marvellous feeling. She was being made truly welcome. In a sense, it felt to her like a coming home. She certainly wasn't drawing back from the affection she was being shown. In fact she was revelling in it. The death of one parent profoundly isolates a child. The death of both parents places an insupportable and terrifying burden on such a child.

She had been a lone teenager. No brothers and sisters to share the burden of her grief. All she'd had was a grandmother who had been horrible to her. God knew which way her life would have gone without Miss Em. Miss Em had fixed a vulnerable young girl's mind not on the distress of her life but on the challenges that lay ahead. Miss Em had cast her as an achiever. She wasn't going to fail her.

In a near magical way the Contessa had taken up from where Miss Em had left off. To Nyree's mind, both women shared the same wonderfully endearing personality traits. They had warmth, humour, spirit, charm, and a serious and abiding interest in intellectual pursuits. She and the Contessa got on so famously it seemed to Nyree they were well on the way to a powerful attachment. There had been no settling in period. They had clicked from the start. It helped that because of the circumstances of her life she had grown used to and greatly valued the company of women at the culmination of their life—accomplished women who had so much wisdom to offer.

She was enjoying every minute of her new life. Of course she knew everyone ultimately stood alone, but her great wish for family, a profound human need, was finding expression within Brant's family. Such was the sheer unexpectedness of life. Her journey towards becoming a woman, a real woman, was well underway. Had she known it, she was positively blooming in this glorious tropical landscape, living an existence that had been offered to her like some precious gift. She wasn't lost. Brant had found her. A divine mystery at work?

Brant, who was often busy from early morning to mid-evening, told her she had given his grandmother a new lease on life.

"She's wonderfully at ease with you, Nyree," he reported back, clearly delighted about the whole thing.

That meant so much to the thriving Nyree. Even Jasmin, the Contessa's devoted maid and companion, was glad of her many extra breaks, so she could go into town and meet up with her friends.

Nyree had finally been shown the Contessa's portrait, painted by her great-uncle. It had been put away in

storage as the Contessa's late husband had taken an inexplicable dislike to it.

Not inexplicable at all! As Nyree had found out.

She'd stood in front of the large portrait that had been placed on a decorative easel, her heart in her mouth. The style was reminiscent of the famous American portrait painter John Singer Sargent—bravura in concept.

The Contessa when younger—she would have been perhaps in her early thirties at the time—had been stunningly beautiful. In the portrait she was seated in a high-backed Louis chair, covered in ivory silk with tiny sprigs of blue flowers. The exact same chair was still in her bedroom. One hand lay on her lap; the other was draped over the gilded side of the chair. Her copious raven hair was drawn back from her face and arranged in a coil on her neck. She wore no jewellery except for a great engagement ring and her wedding ring. Her silk morning gown was ice-blue, with a wide sash in a deep sapphire, the ends trailing over her gown. The Louis chair had been placed in front of a magnificent Chinese screen—also still in her bedroom—as a background.

It was a knockout portrait of a beautiful and sexy woman. A countess who'd reigned over men's hearts. In this case her husband's—Brant's grandfather—and also, without a shadow of a doubt her ill-fated Great-Uncle Howard.

Here was his femme fatale. His Dark Lady. His downfall.

Nyree had stood transfixed, hardly knowing what to say.

"You can see he was in love with me, can't you?" the Contessa said very softly, from behind her. By now she knew Nyree was very intuitive.

"Anyone with eyes to see could," Nyree answered, just as gently. "Not that I could blame him."

"Let me tell you I was attracted to him," the Contessa confessed. "But that was all it was or could be for me. Afterwards, when the portrait was finished, Howard was like a lost soul. I tried to counter the attraction with coldness. Previously I had been very kind to him, not fully realising what I was setting in train. Howard sent me a letter full of torment that my late husband—a wonderful man—found quite by accident. He thought I had really fallen in love with Howard, but I convinced him Howard was only living a dream. My husband took care of matters. Howard never bothered me again. This portrait, that had held pride of place, came down. Your great-uncle very sadly took to drink as a solace. The depth of his connection to me was not reciprocated, Nyree. Unfortunately Howard let his feelings consume him. He had women. Plenty of women. Maybe he only fixated on me because I was not to be had. Who would know? It's a sad story. You know it now, child. We won't speak of it again."

"But the portrait is so beautiful!" Nyree cried in dismay. "You are so beautiful. What are you going to do with it? It should be seen."

"Not in this house, my child." The Contessa shook her head.

"Then may I have it?" Nyree begged. "I'll treasure it always."

The Contessa took only seconds to decide. "Of course you may," she said, clasping Nyree's face and planting a kiss on her forehead. "I would give it to no one else."

Nyree continued to keep a check on the farm, airing the house as though she were coming back to it, walking dreamily around the empty rooms, reliving the sublime moments when Brant had made love to her. Had it actually happened? These days she had reason to doubt it. He was acting more and more like an older cousin, with his mind firmly on more important matters.

Dolly had taken Howard's cat—simply called "Cat"—to live with her. The guard dogs had been returned

to their minder—one of DHH's employees. In the sultry heat and the intermittent heavy downpours the grounds were quickly reverting to jungle. No wonder her great-uncle had gone mad trying to maintain the place. He should have sold. Probably would have, only Miss Em had convinced him to leave his entire estate to her. If she did sell she would ask top pr
ice. DHH would have to cough up. Her darling Miss Em had ensured she would be comfortably placed. When her children came along—and Nyree fervently wanted children—one of the girls would be called Emilia.

For now she was her own woman. Only months ago that would have been the ultimate status. But these days she had to confront the fact that she wanted above anything to be Brant's woman. The woman in his life. He'd sparred with her, comforted her, put his brand on her, mended her. If one believed in Cupid, his arrow had hit the vital spot.

Don't let him smash up your life like the Contessa smashed up Great-Uncle Howard's. A cautionary voice fought for her attention.

She wasn't frightened any more. Another thing was certain. Whichever way things went she wouldn't, like Great-Uncle Howie, take to the bottle.

On her way back from the farm one day, she called into town to see her friend Dolly. Dolly wasn't at the Hibiscus Hut, as it transpired, but as Nyree was returning to the runabout Brant had put at her disposal a woman shouted, "Hold on, there, Nyree."

Nyree turned with a sinking heart. She recognised the voice as Lana Bennett's. Lana Bennett wasn't a friend. Never would be. Lana Bennett had marked her down from the beginning as Trouble.

"How nice to see you!" Lana confounded her by smiling brightly. "I hope you have time for an iced coffee?" She grasped Nyree's arm in the friendliest possible manner. "Terrible weather we're having, isn't it? The only consolation is it lasts such a short time. Most of the year is perfect."

What could she do? Had Lana undergone a much-needed sea change? She had heard of such things.

They went back to Dolly's, where Lana ordered iced coffee for both of them, and two "slivers" of orange-almond cake. "My shout!"

"Please let me pay for myself." Nyree wanted to.

"Won't hear of it!" Lana smiled, showing beautiful white teeth, perfectly straight.

Their order arrived. It took Lana only two minutes more to get down to the real business of the day. "When are you moving out of the big house?" she asked, giving Nyree an encouraging look. "You can't stay there for ever, you know."

"I'm aware of that, Lana," Nyree answered. "It's scarcely my intention anyway. Only the cyclone threat has brought it about. Brant and the Contessa didn't want me at the farmhouse. It was worrying them. They've been very kind to me."

"Why wouldn't it worry them, silly girl?" Lana exclaimed. "Foolhardy in the extreme! Good heavens, you could get raped."

Nyree set down her long spoon. The iced coffee was very good. "I don't think anything like that was ever going to befall me. Obviously you haven't heard I had two big Dobermans standing guard."

"And that made you feel safe?" Lana's brows shot up superciliously.

"Why wouldn't it? They would have eaten anyone who posed me a threat. Even Cat would have gone for them with her claws. I was perfectly safe. But I didn't like the idea of worrying the Contessa at this particular time."

"Ingratiated yourself with her, have you?" Lana laughed with open contempt.

That clarified matters. The gloves were off. "What is it you want to say, Lana?" Nyree called on her grandmother's tone. She could do it at will. "Spit it out before it chokes you."

It clearly wasn't what Lana had expected her to say, or said in the way she'd thought. "Hey, drop the tone!" she exclaimed in shock. "Cheeky little thing, aren't you?" She kept her voice low. "What I want to say is this. Don't turn those big brown eyes on Brant. It will bring you no good, only heartache. Brant is mine. He knows it. I know it. Everyone approves. He will marry me. He will only trifle with you. Who are you, anyway? A no one—the great-niece of the town drunk. What a pedigree! I know Brant feels responsible for you. You are young. But for your own self-respect, my dear, you have to move on. Sell the farm. You'll get a good price. After that, go as far away as you can. There's nothing for you here."

"Really?" Nyree began to delve into her tote for her wallet. "It's a free country. It follows I can roam freely. Is there a threat mixed up somewhere in there, may I ask?"

"Are you serious?" Lana looked taken aback. "I'm not threatening you. I suppose I'm doing Brant's job for him. He's confessed he doesn't have the heart to tell you himself. That's men for you. You've charmed his grandmother, but you haven't charmed Brant to the point where he doesn't want you off his hands. He does. More importantly, he wants the farm. One no-account person and you're holding up the whole project. It will be marvellous for the town—and the whole of the North." She leaned further across the table, her expression earnest. "If you'd like to borrow some money until such time as the farm is sold I can lend it to you. It would be strictly between the two of us. I feel for you. I want to help."

"If that's the case, you'll help by shutting up," Nyree responded, laying money on the table. "If Brant wants me gone, he'll tell me. He doesn't need you or anyone else to do his dirty work. I'd say he'd be very angry if I told him what you've had to say today." She stood up, hoisting her tote over her shoulder.

"You're in love with him, aren't you?" Lana flashed, a kind of violence in her eyes.

Nyree leaned down, perhaps risking scratches. "No way I'd tell you. And no way I'll tell him what you've had to say. So you're safe."

She could see, deep down, that Lana Bennett was a very unhappy person. She wasn't about to add to it. If Brant loved Lana Bennett so be it. There was nothing Nyree could do.

Except mourn.

Maybe Great-Uncle Howard's unhappy experience had put a hex on her?

Cyclone Callie swept in from the sea. Driven westward by the easterly trade winds, it struck the town of Laguna, some forty miles north of Hollister, right on midnight. Torrential rain was falling all over a vast area. A natural occurrence in all tropical areas of the world, cyclones, hurricanes, typhoons brought with them wild destructive winds, damage to life and property, as well as major flooding. The continuing monitoring of the status of Laguna said it was not as severe as had been expected. Though badly affected, the town and the surrounding district were not damaged at the level everyone had feared, the reason being Cyclone Callie had been downgraded from a Category Five to a Four, weakening to Three.

Buildings had lost roofs, power lines were down, and the electricity supply was cut in some areas. There was widespread flooding, with many roads impassable. Mercifully none were dead, none missing—a few non-life-threatening injuries. The town had been well prepared, but they still needed help from the emergency services as well as from trained volunteers.

Brant had long since made his decision to go. He would take the helicopter and land it on any section of the highway or the town that had been left high and dry, taking medical supplies, food and bottled water. He was guaranteed to be met by emergency personnel in one of their Land Rovers.

"I'll come with you," Nyree said, determination and willingness to help visible in every line of her. "I can be of service. People need looking after—the old, the children. I can be there for them, even if it's only minding the kids or making tea and sandwiches."

Brant shook his head, dismissing the idea out of hand. "It won't be any picnic," he told her, too adamantly for her liking.

"Who's expecting a picnic?" Nyree was nearly dancing up and down in frustration. "I'm coming, Brant. Stop treating me like I'm a child."

His brows met. "I'm not, Nyree. Honestly I'm not. It's just—" He was so damned protective of her. Over-protective, perhaps?

"Let her go, my darling," the Contessa intervened, laying a hand on her grandson's arm. "You're concerned, I know, but Nyree is a very capable young woman." The whole household had learned that.

"There—you see!" Gratitude to the Contessa flashed from Nyree's dark eyes. "I'm no child. I'm a capable woman. The Contessa has said so. What more do you want?"

"Dear Lord!" Brant groaned, putting a hand momentarily to his temple. "Women!"

"You can't wrap me up in cotton wool!" Nyree cried, confronting the issue head-on. It was something he had done from the day he had met her. Her mind had to scurry away from what that meant. No time to explore now. She was still feeling raw from her confrontation with Lana Bennett.

The Contessa was laughing quietly, her still brilliant eyes moving between the two of them "My feelings exactly. Your grandfather adopted the same attitude with me, Brant. It was infuriating." She turned to speak directly to Nyree. "You have got to be well wrapped up, though. Oddly, it can turn very cold with the rain. You'll need a raincoat and gumboots, of course, and a good tight cap that will come down over your head."

"Thanks for supporting me, Alena," Brant said, very dryly indeed. "If things worsen it could turn into bedlam, you know."

"Have you forgotten all the young women who served so bravely and competently at the front line?" replied the Contessa, who had seen many sad and tragic things in her life.

"No, I haven't," Brant conceded with a sigh. "But I don't want to take Nyree into any kind of danger."

"Where you go, I go," Nyree said, as though that settled it.

She turned on her heel before he could say another word. She needed to hunt up the necessary gear. She already knew where it was kept. Something was bound to fit her.

They were met, as promised, and driven into town, flood waters gushing away in a rippling tide from the tyres of the big four-wheel drive.

"If y
ou want to be helpful, go to the town hall," Brant instructed, already in the thick of it. This wasn't his first rescue mission by any means. He had been at it since his teens. The town hall was where those evacuated from their homes had gathered, as pre-planned.

"I'll take you." Managing a smile, an exhausted-looking woman in her forties came forward to take hold

of Nyree's arm. "Good of you to come. We need all the help we can get. The name of Hollister is revered around here. Are you family, dear?"

Nyree shook her head. "Family friend." She was—no matter what Lana Bennett had said.

The size of the crowd of displaced people, and the howling of the frightened children brought tears to Nyree's eyes.

"I'll get right in there and see to the kids," she said promptly. "They look like they desperately need comfort."

The woman nodded her approval. "Their dads will be out helping. Their mums are already flat out trying to feed everyone. I'm Heather, by the way."

"Nyree."

The two women shook hands. "I'll go and join the tea and sandwiches brigade," Heather said. "You see what you can do for the kids. It would be good if you could find a way to keep them entertained. There are story books, paper, crayons—all that sort of stuff. The library is right alongside, with easy access between the two buildings."

It was almost like being back at school again, with Nyree Allcott, Head Girl, organising all the lower grades for Sports Day. In no time at all she decided to set up a kids army—a stroke of luck, because the idea immediately took hold. Howling stopped in sheer surprise as the children were organised into grades. Responsibilities were handed down the line. Older, more capable-looking boys and girls acted as group captains, answerable to Nyree, who elected herself Commander. That brought lots of giggles. She had taken off the beanie so her hair sprang around her lovely face and down her back in a wildly curling glory. This added immeasurably to her success—and to the piquancy of her title.

There was no shortage of food and drink: muesli bars, sandwiches, fruit, biscuits, bottled water, and chocolate to keep spirits up. Quizzes were held—Nyree making sure they were all questions adapted to the age group—then art competitions, singsongs. The sound of young voices soaring soothed the nerves of the townswomen, all close to exhaustion point. Knowing their children were safe and happy in Nyree's care allowed them to get on with their more pressing workload.

By the afternoon of the following day Nyree too had reached exhaustion point. The ferocious winds had died away. Rain was still falling—but nothing to compare with the great deluge of two nights before. Everyone inside the town hall was safe. The men out in the thick of it—coming in relays for the quick restorative of a cup of tea and something to eat—were all accounted for.

Nyree hadn't caught a single glimpse of Brant, though she had been assured many times he was safe. Clearly she had her anxiety written large on her face.

"He's a real hero to us folk in the North," the Mayor's wife told her with a kindly, curious eye. "A real man of the people. A great guy. He'd be a darn good Prime Minister. We'd all be behind him."

With the worst of it over, the children who had been behaving so well started to get noisy. They wanted to get out! Out into the fresh air.

"I'll take over from you, Commander." A fourteen-year-old boy, a born leader, elected Group Captain, came to her side, carrying sandwiches and a pot of tea on a tray. "You've done a great job. You must be clean out of puff."

"Just a little, Ian," Nyree drew a shaky breath. "Thanks for this." She had dossed down with the children, but found herself unable to sleep. For most of the night she'd kept looking towards the entrances, hoping Brant's tall figure would move into the main hall.

All she wanted now was to sight him. She wanted to put her arms around him. Hug him. Tell him she was so proud of him—like everyone else.

She was returning her tray to Heather when Heather's husband, covered in thick streaks of mud and slime, made his way towards his wife, grasping her shoulder as though about to fall down. It was clear he was in a state of shock.

Something had happened. For a minute Nyree crouched over like a woman in pain. She was assaulted by anxiety, but determined to find out the cause of it. She set the tray down, then nimble-footed made her way out onto the street, staggering a little with tiredness. The rain was coming down heavily, but she cared nothing for that. She wore only a yellow tank top and jeans, trainers on her feet. She'd been hot and sticky in the hall, but now her hair and clothing were already sopping wet. She saw a man coming towards her—a volunteer worker, a big, tough-looking man in easily identifiable orange gear. As she got close he appeared to be on the verge of tears.

"Is something wrong?" She caught hold of his arm, staring into a blackened, oil streaked, strained face. "Please tell me. I came with Brant Hollister."

"Right!" The man made a huge effort to pull himself together. "You shouldn't be out here, miss. I'm sure Mr Hollister is all right. He's been a tower of strength. One of our mates has been killed. Right at the end!" he exclaimed bitterly. "He lost his footing and fell back against a power line. A dreadful accident. He's got a wife and kids."

Most probably among the children she had sought to entertain, Nyree thought with real grief. "I'm sorry. So sorry. But I have to find Brant."

"Go back into the hall, love," the man advised, his voice breaking. "Nothing you can do."

"Thank you." Her hand went out to him, trying to offer some comfort. "But I have to find Brant."

"Then look for the ambulance," the man told her, realising she was dead set on her task. "They're taking the body away. You'll most likely find Mr Hollister there."

The minute she saw him Nyree felt such relief. If something had happened to Brant…! It didn't bear thinking about. She didn't think she could survive such a tragedy. She rushed forward to meet him—only one of the men had caught sight of her and immediately told Brant. Instantly he turned, tall and powerful, moving with cat-like grace and purpose amid the mayhem. They met up halfway, and Brant caught hold of her and whirled her about.

"I want you to go back to the hall," he ordered, undoing his yellow oilskin and fitting her under it. "I'm all right. Poor devil lost his life. A hell of a thing to happen. We're moving him now. A tragedy. He lost his footing through sheer exhaustion. We were all aware of the fallen power line."

"I'm so, so sorry!" She held on to him for dear life. "Promise me you'll take good care, Brant? Promise!"

"With a reception like this?" Her words reverberated in his very soul. Turquoise eyes ablaze, he hugged her rain-soaked body to him. "Ask one of the women to find you some dry clothes. I'm here for at least another night, but I'm pretty sure I can get you out. A lot of people will be able to go back to their homes. The water is subsiding fast. The lucky families will rally around their neighbours. Mercifully the sand bags held. It's not nearly as bad as was first feared. No arguments now," he said, as she went to protest. "Just do what I ask, Nyree. I've heard all about your splendid efforts with the kids, but I can see you've used up your strength."

They were back under cover of the town hall building. Brant released her from her cocoon, only to pull her back into his arms "Hang in there, Commander," he said, half teasing, wholly proud. "You've been very brave."

"Of course I haven't." Her teeth began to chatter. Every muscle in her legs and back ached from fatigue and sleeping on the hard floor of the hall.

"Oh, Nyree!" With a groan he lifted her clean off her feet, planting a long, deep, possessive kiss directly on her mouth.

Plenty of people would have seen it, would be ready to pass the news on. But Brant either didn't give a damn or actually wanted people to see them together. A couple. No one could possibly kiss a relative or family friend like that!

"Get changed," he ordered
. Then he turned and disappeared again into the rain.

"The long wait's over!" Heather touched Nyree lightly on the shoulder. "You'd better come along with me and get dry, dear," she said, with understanding and kindness. "I know what it's like to wait for your man."

CHAPTER EIGHT

HE'D BEEN told to frighten her. Just that. Not to touch her. That had been made very plain. Just give the little fool a good fright, then get the hell out of there. The money was too good to refuse. He'd get it when the job was done. He hadn't had work—hadn't tried all that hard—for a good eighteen months. The stash on offer would tide him over Christmas and the New Year. He'd been just long enough in the town to know the score. He'd even seen his little victim. Hell, what a beauty! He licked his lips. It was going to be very hard for him to get close to her, albeit wearing a balaclava, and then switch off. But he knew if he disobeyed orders he would be hunted down like a rogue dingo. His client was one of the North's mega-rich. A good-looking bitch, but he thought her appalling. Jealousy was such a curse. And women were the worst of all…

The moment Brant was inside the house, he went in search of his grandmother. They weren't expecting him until the following day, but the emergency services had the situation well in hand.

Alena drew him into a loving embrace. "So good to have you home again, my darling. Nyree has been like a cat on a hot tin roof."

Instantly he felt the quickening in his body. "Where is she?" He didn't look in the least worn out, as well he might, but brimming over with life.

"She went into town." Alena smiled, reading him well. "A few little errands for me. So considerate! I have two grandchildren these days. She was heading out to the farmhouse afterwards."

"Oh, no!" Brant groaned. "I wanted her here. Safe. Not at the farmhouse. Not without the dogs."

"Don't overdo the protectiveness, my darling," Alena warned. "Nyree won't sit still for it. She's a young woman of spirit. She's at the farmhouse to say goodbye." Alena reached up to pat his shoulder. "I don't blame you for feeling so protective. Just ease up a little. She's young, but she's up to whatever you want of her. Why don't you take a run out there when you're ready?"

"I'm ready now," Brant said. He gave Alena a parting kiss on the cheek.

Nyree had to admit it was with a faint air of melancholy that she moved through the farmhouse. Great-Uncle Howard's paintings had already been packed up and put into storage. Brant had said it was a precaution in case Cyclone Callie hit their part of the coast. She even shed a few tears. How unhappy poor Howie must have been. It sounded as if there had been plenty of women for him to pick from, only

he'd settled on the Contessa. A love that was truly taboo. Even then her great-uncle hadn't been able to let go. Now he was dead. She was greatly saddened by his loss of direction. It couldn't be allowed to happen to her.

Surely she could take Brant's kiss at Laguna's town hall as a clear message? Lord knew it had been a clear enough message for a lot of people. Rumour had spread like wildfire. When she had all but run into Lana Bennett outside the town pharmacy Lana hadn't uttered a word, her dark head held high, but the expression in her eyes had been so malignant it had made her shudder. Lana Bennett hated her—which was a clear indicator that Lana held real fears. But no matter Lana's feelings—and Nyree could see they were extremely intense—Lana was a civilised woman. She had a name, a reputation.

Somewhere in the house a board creaked. That was odd. She stood perfectly still while the house settled around her into a listening silence. Nothing! She drew a long breath. For the very first time she felt the farm's isolation. She could have done with Juno and Jupiter right now. Her heart was beating so hard she could scarcely breathe.

The creak came again. There was someone in the house. She didn't want to believe it but her senses told her it was so. The last thing she could do was allow her strength to drain out of her. She moved a few feet to pick up a solid brass candlestick, taking long, deep breaths to steady herself.

"Is anyone there?" she called, ashamed when her voice sounded shaky and near desolate.

That wouldn't do. She had to summon her courage, her spirit.

"Show yourself!" She tried again, forcing not her grandmother's but Miss Em's indomitable tones.

To her horror, the intruder did. He was tall and thin, his head covered by a black balaclava except for his eyes—a washed-out blue—and a thin-lipped mouth. His voice was coarse, lowered to a mere whisper.

"Hi there, little lady! Give you a fright, did I? No wonder…way out here on your own."

Nyree heard the gloating satisfaction. "Don't come a step closer," she said. It was as though Miss Em had really stepped in. "You need to get out of here. And fast. Or you could finish up in jail."

"You're the one who needs to get out, girlie," he grunted. "You're not wanted here."

Nyree gripped the candlestick tighter. "Who sent you?" she demanded, seizing on a hunch. "Someone did. I bet you'd rather not say. How much did she pay you?"

The intruder made a sharp dismissive gesture, as though he didn't want her to continue. "I bet you're scared when you're all tucked up at night," he muttered. "I bet you're scared now."

He moved closer, wanting to come into physical contact with her despite the fact he'd been warned not to. He'd never seen such a beautiful woman. What harm would there be in touching her? Her skin was so flawless he would love to stroke it. She was completely at his mercy. The hand that held the candlestick was trembling, though he didn't doubt she fully intended to use it.

Plucky little thing! He had to admire it. Full of fight. He'd really love to—

Wow! He moved forward a pace, then paused abruptly, seeing her whole expression change. It had

gone from ready-for-anything valiant to thrilled within seconds. It was as though her guardian angel had suddenly materialised, great wings spread, gloriously male and all-powerful. It didn't make sense.

It did to Nyree. "The man I love is right behind you," she said.

The intruder tried to run and was blocked.

"Hell, man, I meant no harm," he wailed. "Back off."

Brant did no such thing. His turquoise eyes flashed in a killing rage. He ripped off the balaclava, grateful when he didn't recognise the face. He wasn't anyone from the town. Putting his considerable strength behind it, Brant unleashed a punch that connected with the man's jaw. The brutal contact gave him enormous satisfaction.

The intruder went down for the count, slumping heavily to the floor. Brant stood over him, knowing he was perilously close to giving the intruder the beating of his life.

"No, Brant. No!" Nyree ran to him, afraid of what might happen. "Someone sent him. He was supposed to frighten me off."

Brant's daunting expression didn't alter. "I couldn't care less who sent him right at the moment." His tone lashed. "First things first."

"No!" She put herself between Brant and the moaning man on the floor, pressing her hands against Brant's chest. Rage was coming off his body in heat waves. "He didn't touch me. I'm begging you to stop. It's you I care about. Not him."

It was a highly precarious situation. And no one was more conscious of it than the groaning intruder. This was Hollister. He was supposed to be out of town. That bitch had her information wrong. He stayed put, nursing his jaw and his broken nose. He needed an emergency medical department. Would that be before or after he was taken in by the police? The operation—supposed to be an easy in-and-out—had gone terribly wrong. And he wasn't finished with.

It was taking time for Brant to wind down his rage. Nyree still clung fast. "You're in a bit of pain, my friend," Brant said, a twisted smile on his mouth.

"You've broken me nose," the man whimpered pathetically.

"Ah—my sympathies. Who sent you?" The demand came, gut-low. "Who gave you the job?"

"I want to explain." The intruder started to sob. "It was that bitch in town—the Bennett woman. Lana. She put me up to it. 'Just frighten her', she said."

"But you couldn't stop there, could you?" Brant couldn't control what he did next. He sank his boot in the man's ribs.

"It was just a job," the man groaned. "I'm broke. Your little lady would have killed me before she let me touch her. I wasn't going to. Swear."

"Was it your old car I saw pulled off at the side of the road?" Brant rasped.

"After I'd done it and got paid I was heading off," the man said. "I'm gonna try for a job at Mount Isa." God knew he felt the urgency. Mount Isa was well over six hundred miles away.

"Well, then, you'd better get going." Brant's voice was very cold. "It will be quite a drive. And I'll be checking on your arrival."

"Ya goin' to let me go?" There was relief and astonishment in the man's tone.

"Get out of Hollister or pay the price," Brant told him grimly, still exerting massive control. "Now, get up off the floor and get the hell out of here. Don't attempt to go near the town. Don't try to contact Lana Bennett. I'll deal with her."

"She put me up to it," the man repeated, as though that was a point in his favour. "Nothin' worse than a jealous woman."

"Don't go back for any worldly possessions either," Brant warned. "Though I guess they're already in your car."

"I'm on my way, mate!" The man staggered to his feet, mopping at his bloody nose with a filthy rag from his trouser pocket. The sheer exhilarating relief! For a moment there he'd thought he wouldn't get out of the house alive.

Some time later Brant came in from the verandah, having watched the intruder make off down the drive. He had wanted to call the police, have the deadbeat slung in jail, but the story would have come out and there would have been a scandal. There was to be no scandal attached to Nyree. He would deal with Lana, and with her family. He had known Lana all his life but he hadn't seen this coming. He felt as if he had failed Nyree when he knew with every fibre of his being she was the love of his life.

"You'd better put some antisepti
c on your hand," Nyree suggested, very quietly, going towards him with a swab and a bottle of antiseptic. "The skin is broken."

"I'd like to have killed him!" There was anguish on Brant's striking face. "He might have been sent only to frighten you, but the sight of you was too much for him. It was all there in his body language. God knows what would have happened if I hadn't arrived."

"I'd have thumped him over the head with the candlestick," Nyree maintained stoutly, gently taking his uninjured hand and leading him to the kitchen.

"You mean you would have tried."

Nyree looked up quickly into his face. She could see he was suffering. All because of her. After her life of emotional deprivation and unresolved grief the knowledge that he loved her—really loved her—made up for the pain. Love had the power to heal all wounds.

"It's over, Brant," she said gently, though her face was radiant. "You came. You were here when I desperately needed you. Let's just dump all thoughts of Lana Bennett and that pathetic character. You broke his nose, you know," she concluded, with a little wry laugh.

"Pity that's all!" Brant went to the sink, washed his hands, dried them, allowing Nyree to apply antiseptic to his bruised and scraped knuckles.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said, her voice and face alive with emotion. "So glad I cou—"

He hauled her to him, his longing such that he had no use for words. He wanted her crushed against him. He wanted her safe. Safe for ever. His mouth came down hard, stayed like that, devouring her, until she gave an involuntary little whimper. It wasn't his mouth—she adored the passionate pressure—it was his strong hands, clenched around her lightweight body.

"I'm sorry!" Immediately he relaxed his hold. "You make me so afraid." His voice vibrated with niggling worry.

She was so young, and she'd had little time to experience life. No experience of sex. He couldn't help it, but that made him furiously glad. She hadn't even finished her education. Of course she could. He would help in every way possible. But was she ready to marry? Was she ready to marry him?

Unknowingly, she would be taking on a huge load. One day he would succeed his billionaire father, with all that entailed. It was a lifestyle greatly to be desired, but with it came lots of hazards ordinary people would never know or wish to contend with. His parents' marriage had been destroyed along the way. It couldn't happen to him. He needed Nyree. He would never let her run away.

Nyree rose on her tiptoes to stare into his blazing eyes. "How can I make you afraid? I love you!" It came out in a breathless rush. "I'll always love you. You've changed my life. You've changed me. Do you not want me in the same way?"

Brant shook his head dazedly. He wanted her so much he was in pain. "Nyree, my love, I want you more. I want all of you. Body, soul and mind. I'm prepared to do anything to keep you. I want to love and protect you. Alena has told me to lighten up. She knows the strength of my feelings for you. I guess my grandad was the same about her. But we're one-woman men. Even Dad hasn't got over my mother. He lost her. I could never lose you. I want to marry you. I want to marry you the moment you're ready. But I beg of you—put me out of my misery and make it soon. You can have your own life. You must finish your degree. You can become a child psycholo—"

No doubts crippled Nyree. The past was history. Brant was her future. This time she took the initiative. She pulled his dark head down to her and began covering his face in burning little kisses, casting off every last little inhibition along the way. This man was her life, her love, her soon-to-be husband. This was her homecoming. She knew she possessed powers only he could unleash. They would forge a wonderful marriage—a wonderful partnership.

Brant responded by lifting her up onto the counter to make their lovemaking easier. She was a creature of air and fire. His woman. Core of his heart.

"I'll only ask one thing." Nyree broke off their hungered kissing, her beautiful face flushed and enormously excited. "One of our girls must be called Emilia, okay?"

If a man was allowed to weep, he would. Weep with gratitude and triumph. One of our girls! Their children. "Emilia it is!" he declared, in a deep, exultant tone. "After all, Miss Em sent you to me."

Inherited by the Billionaire

Dear Reader,

Do you remember being young and in love for the first time ever? The ecstasy and agony, the deep, deep feelings and hopes and dreams, uncertainties and insecurities. Does he love me the same way? What will happen if I tell him? I want his kisses and to be with him, spend time with him…. Can I trust my feelings? Can I trust his?

Sometimes in real life that first love is all too quickly gone and forgotten. For Callie Humbold, Gideon Deveraux has been hard to forget, even if he did push her away the moment she tried to confess her feelings. But she was young, and it was just a crush.

Wasn't it?

Of course it was! Now Callie is all grown-up and in charge of a successful guesthouse on an island off Australia's Victoria coast. She has an unconventional marriage to organize for Gideon's equally unconventional aunt, and Gideon is here to try to put a stop to the marriage—and Callie's plans to go on running the guesthouse after his aunt moves off the island. Men and their hearts keep all of us dreaming, don't they? We find one who is guarded, or doesn't believe he knows how to give and receive deep love, yet we can see the potential in him. Well, maybe that's a story best told by our Callie, herself. I'll let you be the judge of Gideon's potential.

I hope you enjoy this story. Maybe it will bring back some memories of your first love, too.

Love and hugs from Australia,

Jennie

For a very special "you." Deeper than the ocean, wider than the sky, more enduring than forever. But you know that…

CHAPTER ONE

'ONCE I've touched base with my aunt and with my…'

Ward? Inherited package of trouble? The first term was outdated, and not accurate; the second was more to the point. Callie Humbold was a pert, opinionated, spunky, sweet-natured, gorgeous, annoying bundle of uncontrollable youthful femininity. She had given Gideon Deveraux more than his share of headaches in the time he'd known her and ultimately felt responsible for her.

Gideon had sent Callie to his aunt seven years ago, to give himself distance from those headaches. And for other reasons that had to do with one night out of time and a lack of control and judgement on his part. But that was old news now. He didn't know why the thought had even come to him.

Because Callie was on his mind right now, he supposed. But his focus was on the obligation he felt towards her.

He'd played an almost big-brother role to her during the time her uncle had worked as the

groundskeeper on his family's outer Melbourne estate. Reid had asked him to keep an eye on the boisterous girl during her childhood.

Then Gideon had saved Reid's life, when Callie was twelve years old, and the older man had put his own unique twist on 'a life for a life' and put Callie even further into Gideon's safekeeping.

It had come as no surprise, really, when Reid had died a few years later and willed the responsibility for Callie in Gideon's direction—a moral obligation more than a legally based one.

But Gideon wouldn't have been able to leave her to her own devices when Reid Humbold died anyway. She'd barely turned eighteen, and Gideon's parents hadn't exactly been going to care about or even notice her needs.

Gideon had made promises of his own at that time. To Dianna. He'd been about to get married and thus fulfil his family's nice, tidy, unemotional expectations for carrying on the Deveraux standing in society with a wife of equally acceptable status.

'Once you've touched base with your…?' The woman at his side raised her brows with just the right amount of polite, businesslike interest.

Thirty years old, career-focused, whipcord-thin and oozing determ
ination from her pores, Heather Stiller would be the perfect new manager at the island guest house.

'With my aunt and my ward,' Gideon finally finished. He braced his feet on the jetty and lifted his and Heather's travel bags into one hand. His yacht's skipper had already turned around the small boat Gideon had purchased to get him here and left them to it.

'Nothing much to see, Mr Deveraux. Wish I could have brought you in your usual style, in one of your real seagoing craft…'

Those had been the man's parting comments. And there wasn't a whole lot to see.

One tiny windswept island off Australia's Victoria coast. One guest house being run on that tiny island by Gideon's hippy aunt Mary—the scandal of the Deveraux family, as far as his parents were concerned, because she'd been born on 'the wrong side of the blanket'. Not a socially acceptable thing for the Deveraux family!

His family had refused to officially acknowledge Mary, in any way. Years ago Gideon had tried to address that fact with Mary on one of her rare visits to the family estate to see 'her favourite nephew'. Actually he was her only nephew, and she had pushed her way past his parents for those visits.

That day she'd patted his hand and told him she had the guest house to run on her wild little island. If he wanted to make her happy, she'd said, he could take it over so she was renting it from him and not his parents.

Gideon's business dealings had taken him from the status of inherited millionaire to self-made billionaire. So he'd bought the island and everything on it, set things in place to make sure Mary was safe and secure there, and then he'd got on with his own interests.

Mary had somehow drifted out of his life. And then he'd put Callie into his aunt's hands.

He should have checked on Mary more often—made the effort to come out here before now. Should maybe have checked on Callie in person, too, once she was here.

He'd been certain Mary would look after Callie, and it had seemed better for him to stay away.

Gideon gestured to the coastal track ahead. 'The guest house is only a couple of minutes' walk from here, Heather. Once I've spoken with Mary and…Callandra, I'll show you around so you can get a feel for the work you'll be doing here.'

Gideon had a wedding to attend—his aunt's. It might be nice to know something about the groom before then! And he had a new manager to instal in his aunt's island guest house—the woman now standing at his side, glancing around her in proprietorial fashion.

And Gideon had Callandra Humbold to sort out, too. Just to be sure Callie had a secure future ahead of her. He owed Reid's memory that much at least.

'It's not a very large island, is it?' The woman he'd chosen to replace his aunt Mary fell into step beside him.

A brisk wind battered at them, whipped Heather's shoulder-length brown hair about her narrow, intense face. It was February—the end of summer. Not cold here, but blustery.

Heather went on. 'I don't imagine there's much in the way of entertainment, but I can tolerate such conditions for the sake of furthering my career.'

'Yes…' Gideon wasn't really listening. His attention was fixed ahead, beyond the wild shore to the left, beyond the wild battered trees and shrubs to the right, to the guest house perched on a rise.

For all that the place hadn't made a profit for years, it appeared Mary had finally used some of his generous allowance to keep it in good order. He would put things on a better business footing now he had a non-family member to place into the management role, of course.

A figure dressed in green dungarees and a bright orange T-shirt, with a ponytail of matching orange hair, emerged from a shed carrying a bucket. She had a purposeful expression on her pixie face and she glowed with energy and vitality.

It was Callandra. But not the young girl he remembered. There was maturity in her face that hadn't been there seven years ago—a womanliness about her that was unmistakable. She'd grown up. He'd known she would have, but somehow seeing the evidence of that…

Callie scrunched up her face and examined the contents of the bucket in her hand before she squared her shoulders and started along the path. A memory of her face tipped up, the freckles across the bridge of her nose standing out as she glared at him, flashed through Gideon's mind and for a moment froze him to the spot. God, they'd had some arguments.

And then they'd stopped arguing, and somehow there'd been that night that had led to him shipping Callie out to Mary…

Not relevant, Deveraux. But he did have to talk to Callie. He had to at least know what her plans were

for the future—that she had plans and wasn't going to be left out on a limb by Mary marrying and moving away from the island.

Gideon could ensure Callie employment here, of course. But under his new management she wouldn't have the freedom for long walks on the beach and the other activities that seemed to be all Mary had to tell him about Callie when he did occasionally phone in to check on her.

His aunt could be vague. Indeed, Mary hadn't even asked Gideon to provide a replacement manager here, or mentioned Callie's future.

Gideon felt an odd stab of something in the centre of his chest that might have been guilt. For sending Callie away seven years ago, and for pushing her to the back of his mind so thoroughly once he'd done that.

'That's your ward?'

'She was, unofficially, when she was younger—yes.' How much had Callie changed? She'd been full of inexplicable dreams and notions back then. Did she still have that wide-eyed outlook on life that he'd found so touching, even when it had driven him mad?

'Would you excuse me, Heather?' Gideon wanted to catch Callandra before she got too far away. 'Perhaps you'd like to take a look at the grounds for a few minutes while I speak with my—with Callie.'

The woman at his side nodded her agreement.

Gideon fixed his gaze on a retreating back with a set of slender shoulders, the bucket swinging wildly from her hand and wisps of carroty hair escaping the bobbing ponytail, and picked up his pace.

Crab whispering might be an unconventional pastime, but it was popular with the guests. If Callie Humbold wanted to continue the fine tradition of her midnight crab whispering tours once this weekend was over, she needed to keep her exoskeleton friends happy between now and then.

Which meant drawing them out to feed them, whether the guest house was abuzz with pre-wedding activity or not. Callie hefted the bucket with renewed determination.

'Callandra? Will you hold up a moment? I'd like to talk to you.'

The words, spoken in a firm, masculine, oh-so-familiar tone brought her to a standstill while her heart did all sorts of unwelcome flip-flops in her chest.

'You didn't reply to your invitation,' she said with a snap.

Great, Callie. Start with an accusation and the conversation can deteriorate from there.

Why did he always manage to make her feel either defensive or offensive? Never anything in between?

Oh? Could that be because he was always putting you on the defensive? Or, more to the point, because the last time you saw him you were deeply embarrassed because you'd naïvely tried to seduce him and he had just wanted you gone before his fiancée got there?

Yes, the whole episode had hugely embarrassed her—especially Gideon trying to gently push her away…

But that had been seven years ago. Surely he'd have forgotten all about it in the intervening time?

'I—Mary didn't think you were coming.' Callie swung around, bucket and all, to face the man who'd banished her to his aunt's island after that episode. He'd gone on to get married. And, yes, Callie had been hurt about that.

A little. Barely at all, really. And only because she'd been young and naïve and hadn't understood how he could want only the right social ties, someone to look good on his arm, in a way Callie, with her lack of any kind of social anything, never could have done. He hadn't wanted love. That had been the most inexplicable part to her. And she'd come so close to offering it to him. Well, in a young girl 'crush' sense.

The worldly prince and the foolish gardener's niece? It might cut it as a fairy tale, but not as reality.

Callie drew a deep breath and schooled her face to show nothing of those thoughts. They were old news anyway.

'I wasn't expecting you.' Good. That was good. It covered her unguarded initial response. 'That is, Mary and I weren't expecting you—but I'm sure Mary will be very pleased you've come for her wedding. She's not here right now, but I'm expecting her back later today.'

'I only got the invitation yesterday.' He wrapped long, lean fingers around slender male hips. Elbows out, strong chin tipped upwards, dark blue eyes watching her through dusky lashes. 'I've been overseas on business.'

'Speaking with your Italian art buyer.' Callie nodded her head before she could stop herself.

When he simply looked askance at her, Callie felt compelled to explain.

'The last time you phoned you told Mary that was what you might be doing.' Callie didn't hang on every piece of information about Gideon. Mary just liked to tell her the news. That was all.

'The worldwide galleries are proving to be an enjoyable enterprise,' Gideon said, as though they were simply one more means of occupying himself and investing his billions.

And no doubt that was exactly the case.

Callie looked up into his face. Gideon stood at six foot two inches tall. He had an entire head and most of his shoulders on her in height. His jet-black hair was a little longer than she remembere
d. His face, if anything, looked even more attractive than it had. The fine lines at the corners of his eyes added character, and somehow that character reflected his strength as a man.

So—fine. He was a man, and he was powerful, wealthy and influential. A man women would swoon over, and did.

Callie was equally as strong as him. The twists and turns of her life had left her with no choice but to be that way. Gideon sending her to Mary had simply been more of the same, and she certainly wasn't about to swoon over him right now.

Been there, done that. Had the embarrassment and rejection to prove it.

She'd been immature at the time—hadn't understood. She'd misread brotherly affection for desire and, worse, for love.

The desire she'd had a taste of, when he'd reacted without thinking. Before he'd remembered who he was with. The rest didn't even count, anyway.

Callie tipped up her chin. 'At least you're here. Your parents weren't "available" to attend the wedding, so you're it for Mary's family. It's a shame she won't be here very long to enjoy you. She and Mac leave for their honeymoon straight after the wedding tomorrow.'

'Where does that leave you?'

He seemed concerned about her answer. Yet it was an odd kind of question, wasn't it?

'It leaves me right here. Life as usual. Surely Mary mentioned that in her invitation?'

'My aunt didn't even manage to mention the name of her prospective groom.' Gideon chopped a hand through the air. 'Are you saying you're happy to remain here, working under the new guest house manager?'

What did he mean, the new guest house manager? 'I'll be the guest house manager.'

It had been her role for the past five years. Callie had no desire to change that now. And as for Mary omitting Mac's name from the invitation—there was only one reason Gideon's aunt would have done that.

Actually, there are forty-seven reasons, and they're all booked into the guest house for the weekend. But Mac has been completely open about all of it, and provided we keep the wedding private there won't be any problem. The family's really quite tame these days, anyway, apparently…

'Mac and Mary plan to live a low-key life after this. Very low key.'

As in totally out of the limelight and unnoticed.

Gideon nodded, though his expression suggested he wasn't entirely sure of the reason for her vigorous statement.

'I guess that's up to them. But about your future…' Gideon's brows drew down. 'Do we have our wires crossed somehow? Do you mean you plan to assist the new manager?'

'I mean I've been doing the job—'

A woman strolled through the gardens beyond Gideon. Quite a way back, because Callie had been halfway along the track that led to the cove by the time Gideon hailed her.

The new manager Gideon had mentioned? He'd already made his plans and now intended simply to put them in motion?

For the first time concern filtered through other emotions and got a chokehold on Callie.

Gideon could do that—get rid of her and replace her with someone else. He owned the entire island and everything on it. Callie had just assumed he'd allow her to go on running the guest house. She'd been doing a good job of it, turning better and better profits each year. She didn't want to leave.

Panic threatened. Callie tried to ignore it.

'When will my aunt be back?' Gideon rammed a hand through his hair. 'Soon, I hope? It appears I need to speak with her, about a few things.'

Yes. Mac and the family and the wedding. Callie suppressed a sigh.

Gideon started to stride back towards the guest house.

Callie wanted to keep him away from there, to wait until Mary returned and leave his aunt to sort all that out with him. But she didn't have the luxury of choice. And if they were going in, she wanted to get her words in about her job first.

'I don't want to leave your replacement manager jobless, Gideon, but I've had the role of manager here for five years. I've done well in it, and the guest house is more profitable than it's been for years. You can't simply push me out of the role.' Well, he could, but… 'There are fair and reasonable rules about that sort of thing.'

That was what mattered right now—ensuring her job was secure. Not memories of the past.

Yet Gideon's gaze had swung to hers, and amongst the confusion in his eyes was the memory she had thought he might not have held onto. Of that night when she'd gone to his detached apartment on the family estate and they'd kissed. Her young heart had been on her sleeve until Dianna had arrived and Gideon hadn't been able to get rid of Callie fast enough.

She hadn't known Dianna even existed as anything more than a contact in Gideon's wide circle of glitzy, upper-class associates. It showed her naïveté at that time that she would have assumed he wasn't with someone.

'Mary has always been the guest house manager.' Gideon stated this with a frown on his face as shields came down over his eyes, hiding his thoughts from her as he'd finally hidden them that night.

'Your aunt trained me into the position.'

Callie pushed the thoughts of the past away as best she could. It wasn't easy. Not when that brief expression in Gideon's eyes had stirred both memories and senses. Oh, how she hated that it was so!

'I know the work. Your aunt has taught me the business from the ground up. I've taken that knowledge and developed my skills further to make the guest house the most profitable and viable it's been in all the time Mary's had it. I achieved that, Gideon. And I want to remain here and continue in the role of guest house manager.'

What she didn't want was to revisit the past. Not in her thinking, and certainly not in a stirring of old awareness.

Her words had shocked him. That fact was in his eyes.

'But I've been propping the business up financially for years,' he said slowly.

'Apparently you've thought that to be the case, but in fact that 'prop-up' money is untouched. Your finance manager should have told you.' Callie hefted the bucket in her hands. 'Now I really have to do this job at the cove. If you'll excuse me…'

Maybe if she walked away, took care of her small task and came back, everything would have miraculously fixed itself. Callie sighed.

'I'll come with you.' He eased the bucket from her hands, glanced into it.

'There's no need. I can do this myself.' She didn't want to end up explaining her crab whispering to Gideon on top of all the other issues she had to face with him right now. Good manager material would not conduct midnight crab whisperer tours—but they worked for her, and they worked for the guest house's clientele.

Callie reached for the bucket to take it back and go on her way, ignoring the fact he would still be here when she returned from feeding her 'pets'. She needed just a few minutes' break—a chance to regroup.

'Why don't you and your…guest check in while I do this? You're lucky. Rooms twelve and eighteen are still available. They're the only ones we have left.' What else could she do but invite both of them to stay? 'Take the keys for those and I'll talk to you later—'

Instead of the bucket handle, her fingers had closed over Gideon's hand. That contact—that simple, ordinary, shouldn't-have-done-a-thing-to-her contact—sent twinges through her that shouldn't exist.

They had to be echo twinges. Past twinges. Seven years ago twinges. They were not current twinges, because she was not going there again with that old silliness about him. It had been a crush!

'Really, Gideon. Thanks for the offer, but I need to do this by myself.'

Callie wasn't cutting and running. She simply needed to go and do this. By herself. Just for a few minutes before she came back and faced introducing him to MacKay and his family. Before she met the woman he'd brought to the island to replace her as manager of her beloved guest house.

Well, Calli
e wasn't giving up that position.

She regained ownership of the bucket and stomped away along the path.

CHAPTER TWO

GIDEON gave Callie the space she so clearly wanted. While he did so, he used his mobile phone to contact his finance manager. What he learned from the man was still in his mind as Callie rinsed out her bucket, stored it in the shed beside the guest house and rather reluctantly moved towards him and Heather, where they stood several feet from the guest house's open front doors.

Gideon finished his second phone call and turned to the woman who had travelled to the island with him.

'Heather, I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding about this position.' Gideon quietly explained the situation. 'Callandra has been running the guest house herself for several years now. I didn't realise that, and I'm assured she's been doing a very good job. I can't let her go in these circumstances.'

He took a deep breath. 'I've recalled our boat. My skipper will have it here within the hour, so you can return to Melbourne with him. You'll be reimbursed for your time, and I'll arrange a meeting with you once I'm back in Melbourne myself. We'll sort out an alternative position for you.'

'Something as good as this? With the advantages of being on an island and autonomous as manager—?' The woman cut her words off, but it was clear she wasn't happy. Her gaze narrowed, and a hard expression crossed her face before she masked it behind a blank smile. 'Well, I'll hold you to that discussion.'

Callie joined them then, and he made the introductions. 'Callandra, this is Heather Stiller. Heather, meet Callandra Humbold.'

'I won't be staying.' Heather bent to retrieve her travel bag. 'In fact, I think I'd prefer to wait at the jetty—if you'll both excuse me?'

She walked away purposefully and had her mobile phone at her ear before she was halfway gone. Calling a friend to complain about her treatment, perhaps?

Gideon didn't have time to think about the woman's abrupt leavetaking. He would straighten things out with her when he returned to Melbourne.

For now, he turned to Callie. 'I just spoke with my finance manager.' How did he explain that he had ignored all reports on the guest house's progress, preferring not to let himself think about the waif of a girl who had tempted him almost beyond his commitment to marry Dianna? That marriage had foundered two years ago, but that was hardly the point.

Gideon couldn't explain it—other than to put that night down to an unexpected burst of sexual attraction on his part, and a sweet but childish foolishness on Callie's. Yet he still felt it now—that edge of consciousness of Callie that had been birthed when she'd set out so naïvely to try and seduce him.

Being attracted to her was the last thing he'd wanted to feel. Back then Callie had been too young, and he'd been about to get married. Now he was divorced. Dianna had taken her nice tidy financial settlement and moved in with the even tidier minor prince of a struggling principality on the other side of the world. A social step upwards. Given his own family's attitude, and their expectations in relation to social standing, how could he blame Dianna for that?

After their separation Gideon had got on with his life without much of a ripple. Callie, on the other hand, was a ripples kind of girl. A girl who would fall madly in love—not want to see financial statements and a family tree back five generations before she committed herself. Gideon wasn't a ripples man. And he'd been taught from the cradle that financial statements, and the content thereof, were right up there with the Holy Grail.

'The management position here is yours, Callie, for as long as you want it and as long as it's working out.' That was what he needed to say. Callie's secure future was all he needed to think about. 'I only needed to know you weren't being left out in the cold, and since you're not—'

'I'm nicely tidied away once again?' Her words were flippant, throwaway. The expression in her eyes

before she glanced away belied that flippancy, but then a burst of noise came from inside the guest house and she turned her head.

Gideon followed the direction of her gaze just in time to see a middle-aged man step out through the front doors. He walked straight towards them.

'Callie?' The man had a deep voice, and a face that was somehow familiar to Gideon. 'Is this Mary's nephew? He's made it for the wedding after all?'

'Yes, actually. Isn't that wonderful?' Callie stepped forward with a strained smile.

Because of her conversation with Gideon? He'd let the replacement manager go. Callie's job was secure. So what was worrying her?

Gideon examined the tall, middle-aged man with blond hair and grey eyes and plenty of life stamped into the deep grooves of his face. Puzzle pieces began to click into place.

Callie paused and drew a deep breath. 'MacKay Jones, I'd like you to meet Gideon Deveraux. Gideon, this is Mary's fiancé.'

Gideon's brows snapped down. There might be more than one MacKay Jones in Australia, of course, but Gideon now understood the sense of familiarity. He'd seen this man's face splashed across the newspapers and on the TV news. It had been years ago. MacKay was the head of a well-known family—and not in a good way…

Gideon's gaze swung to Callie's face.

Her chin lifted and she directed a stare at him. One that warned him.

What? Not to ask what his aunt was doing, marrying a notorious white-collar criminal? The eldest of a family of four brothers who'd cost Australia's economy enormous amounts of money because of the crimes they'd committed? They'd got away with it over decades, until they were finally caught. They had all been incarcerated for those crimes in the 1990s. MacKay would have been behind bars for at least a decade.

And Mary wanted to marry this man? Marry into that history? Put herself in the hands of someone like that?

'I recognise the name.' From the corner of his eye Gideon caught movement across the guest house's garden grounds. A guest, no doubt. A MacKay guest? Were there a lot of MacKay guests here? Even more potential for trouble? 'Not that I saw it on the invitation,' Gideon murmured, while his mind examined the possibilities and he tried to comprehend why Mary would have aligned herself with this man. 'Mary hand-scribbled it on a piece of pink paper and conveniently left out—'

'Mary invited her favourite nephew to her wedding because she wanted you to be present for an occasion that means a lot to her.' MacKay Jones spoke mildly, but his eyes narrowed. 'As far as I'm concerned, that's the only fact that's relevant here.'

There was a protectiveness in this man towards his future bride that Gideon couldn't miss, and he didn't quite know what to make of that other than its meaning that if Gideon felt he needed to pull Mary out of this situation—even with his power and his money—doing so could potentially a) be difficult, and b) have ramifications. What sort of man was he dealing with?

Gideon wanted information—knowledge so he could work out how best to manage this unexpected turn of events. He hefted his travel bag in his hand.

'Perhaps I could dump this somewhere and we could have a chat, Callandra? Catch up about a few

things.' They needed to do that now even more than before. When Mary returned Gideon would need to speak with her as well. But for now, he had questions for Callie. 'In the manager's office?'

'I have responsibilities—things I need to do.'

The old familiar gleam of defiance was in Callie's eyes. A mixture of anger and…and feeling trapped, as though her power over making her own decisions was under threat. Why hadn't he seen that in her before?

'Callie—'

'There's nothing to speak about anyway, Gideon.' She glanced at MacKay Jones, and this time, despite the worry in the backs of her eyes, it was clear that she, too, felt affection for this man his aunt must obviously love.

A daughterly kind of affection.

The sort that might blind her to keeping herself safe?

'Please.' Gideon glanced at MacKay and then locked his gaze with Callie's big green eyes. 'I really don't feel I can take no for an answer on this right now.'

Callie dithered for several seconds before she finally gave in. 'Fine. It'll be a waste of time, but we'll talk. At least by doing that I can pave the way, so Mary doesn't have to—'

She stopped herself, but the same thoughts were in Gideon's mind. Mary had disappeared today in case he'd decided to show up. That way she wouldn't have to be the one to confront her nephew when he arrived and discovered just who she intended to marry.

Callie glanced at MacKay once more. 'Mac, will you keep going with the wedding preparations for me? This won't take long.'

The man hesitated. Not because he didn't want to do the work, Gideon imagined, but because he wasn't sure he wanted Callie fighting any battles on his behalf.

MacKay frowned in Gideon's direction. 'It might be better if Gideon and I speak.'

'Not this time.' Callie said it gently, before Gideon could say anything at all. She rested a hand on the older man's wiry arm and gently met his gaze. 'Please, Mac?'

After a moment MacKay dipped his head. 'All right. But I'll be here if you need me.'

'I know you will.' Callie touched his arm again as she passed him.

Gideon followed her as she veered not towards any office area but outside.

They got as far as the beach before he broke the silence. 'Do you have some kind of objection to speaking inside? In the office?' The sand beneath their feet made soft crunching sounds as he asked his question.

Callie shrugged one shoulder. 'Mary always says things discussed in the outdoors are easier to resolve. I thought you'd like it. You had a beach wedding…'

'Dianna's idea. It made her look good in the society pages.'

'I'm sorry she left you, Gideon.' Her expression held empathy
, concern for him, and questions he could read as clearly as if she had spoken them aloud.

Had he managed to fall for Dianna during their marriage? Or had he still seen her as an accessory to his

life and goals, nothing more?

If the former, Callie would be disappointed in him. If the latter…he wasn't sure what she would think.

She went on. 'I hope that it didn't hurt you too much when it happened?'

This much was clear. Her sincerity was obvious. The almost wounded expression that quickly came and went in the backs of her eyes was less so.

She dropped her gaze away from his. 'Sorry. I forgot for a moment that it was never about that for you. It was only about suitability.'

'That's right.' He hadn't been hurt, and yet, looking into her eyes, now he ached in ways he couldn't explain.

Callie kicked at a clump of damp sand with her foot.

He thought she murmured, 'So why did it hurt me so much at the time?' but he wasn't certain.

Gideon wondered how the conversation had turned into this territory anyway. He forced it back—because that was better for both of them. 'We need to speak about Mary and this man.'

'About a wedding that's going to make two people very much in love even happier?' Callie's chin tipped up to a challenging angle.

'Will my aunt be happy if her safety is in danger with MacKay Jones?' Maybe it hadn't been all that wise to put Callie into Mary's hands. At the time he'd thought it would be best for Callie.

It had been best. Callie was happy here. That was what mattered. Mary did check in and make sure you knew that, even if you didn't often respond to her messages.

Yes, but what about now?

'Mary adores Mac.' Callie spoke the words to Gideon with conviction. She had to make Gideon see this and accept it. The sooner the better. Yes, Mac had a criminal record. Yes, he'd done some dubious things in his past. But the Mac she and Mary knew was a wonderful man, and Gideon was going to have to accept that.

Callie searched Gideon's face and her heart ached. He didn't understand about Mac and Mary's love. Because he's not capable of loving like that, and he was certainly never going to love a young girl like that.

It had hurt so much when Gideon married Dianna. Callie had spent that day wandering all over the island and trying not to think about him—about how he had rejected the offer of her heart and chosen an emotionless match with Dianna instead.

Callie cut off the thoughts. They were the height of silliness anyway. She'd been a baby—hadn't known her mind, let alone her heart!

Crush. It had been a crush.

'MacKay Jones has spent years of his life in jail.' Gideon's brows drew down.

Callie forced her attention back to the conversation. This was about Mac and Mary, not her and Gideon. Not that there was any 'her and Gideon'. There never had been.

And there she went again. Thinking about things she didn't need to think about.

‘Mac has spent years since then being integrated into society. Quietly, it’s true, but he’s a well-adjusted model citizen.’

‘Maybe that’s true in terms of how the public sees him, but what about his private life? Jail is a hard place, Callie. Even if he went in there a gentleman, I don’t believe it would have been possible for him to remain one over that period of time.’

Enough of his concern came through that Callie softened a little and joined the dots on what Gideon wasn’t saying.

‘You think he might harm Mary?’ This was something that had crossed Callie’s mind, too—but only until she knew Mac. ‘It won’t happen. He adores her, and he is still a gentleman. In all the ways that count.’

Gideon searched her gaze for a long moment. ‘I wish I could put my faith in that.’

‘You can.’ Callie brushed sand off the cuffs of her dungarees. They were too long, and she should probably have rolled them up a little before she started walking.

Better still, she should get back to work now, and put all these silly resurrected thoughts about Gideon right out of her mind.

‘All the rest of this aside, the guest house is busy at the moment. MacKay has almost fifty of his relatives here for the wedding, and though they’re all working to help prepare everything I’m still needed for all sorts of things. I don’t have a lot of spare time right now. There’s nothing really to discuss. The wedding is happening. End of story. And it’s not your place to investigate him, either—just in case you had that in mind.’

Oh, yes, she had worked out Gideon would want to do that, and the expression in his eyes right now confirmed her suspicion.

‘It’s my place to protect my aunt if she needs to be protected.’ Gideon sucked up a slow breath and blew it out again. ‘And please tell me none of those guests are MacKay Jones’s notorious brothers.’

‘Of course they’re his brothers. And his cousins and his uncles, and all their partners, wives and significant others. None of them are that notorious. Not any more, anyway.’

Callie clamped her teeth together. She lifted her face and let the sea wind blow through her hair and across her cheeks, whip at her clothing and blow some of her stress away.

‘Mac’s family have come from all over Australia to be here for this wedding.’ That had to count for something.

‘A wedding I am truly not at all convinced is in Mary’s best interests—whether you feel resolved about it, or not. What is my aunt doing, Callandra?’ His tone sharpened. ‘And what were you thinking, to let things come to this and not tell me?’

‘How do you know it was me? Just because I introduced—’ She cut the words off.

‘Actually, I didn’t mean that, but I might have known you’d have brought them together. Let me guess. You picked MacKay up as a stray, somehow, and thought he needed to be loved and accepted. Next thing he and Mary were interested in each other.’ He turned his head to stare out to sea, as though he might find calm in the tossing of the waves.

Callie felt more like the tossing itself. ‘Mac is a nice man.’ In Callie’s opinion he was one of the best. ‘And he’s not a stray.’

Were strays so bad, anyway? She'd been one—handed to an uncle who hadn't been quite sure what to do with her when her mother died. 'I got talking to Mac on a tram in Melbourne one day and he offered me a coffee. Since I was meeting Mary after we did our separate shopping, I agreed.'

'I didn't know—were you in Melbourne often?'

Apparently he hadn't ever imagined her there. Callie wasn't sure how she felt about that. She had certainly thought of him there—had always watched and wondered if their paths would cross. Though she had refused to do anything to try to instigate that.

He'd banished her, after all. She had to have some pride.

'As surprising as it might be to you, I do have a social life that includes trips to Melbourne. Dates, outings.'

Mary had always insisted Callie take time off at weekends on a rotational basis for this reason. But Callie gave up on that topic now. Something told her she really didn't want to go there with Gideon, who was suddenly looking quite fierce and disapproving.

Whatever was that all about?

'Mary and Mac love each other.' This was what she needed to focus on. 'Whatever his past, he is a good and kind man now and as far as I'm concerned if he makes her happy that's all that matters.'

Gideon stopped on the crunchy sand, turning to face her so she had to stop, too. 'You can't tell me he's some run-of-the-mill, mild, trustworthy nice guy, Callie.'

'A conventional good guy? Does he have to be perfect to love Mary and be all that she needs?'

She opened her mouth to try to explain that it didn't matter. That when a man loved a woman, or a woman loved a man, it just was. Callie somehow knew this, deep inside her soul. She hadn't ever loved like that, of course. No doubt she'd merely sensed it, as a result of her observation of others—like Mary and Mac.

A little rush of emotion clogged her throat and she had to swallow it back.

You're just getting overly sentimental because there's a wedding in the air, Callie. And that's perfectly normal and to be expected.

'Mary got to know Mac. And he loves her. He's very sincere.' Callie forced the words out over that stubborn lump in her throat. It wasn't about her and Gideon. It was not! 'For Mary, any possible perils don't matter anyway, because she loves Mac that much.'

'And what about the rest of the family? How can you know they're all trustworthy?' Gideon's words were all about the current situation, and yet his gaze lingered on her with a focus that was about more than that.

Why did he have to do that? Look at her as though she was the only person he wanted to look at? It wasn't fair. Anything else aside, it didn't help her equilibrium at all!

'I'm sure MacKay and Mary are perfectly—'

'What if one of them harmed you?'

He bit down on the words but his gaze didn't lose its concerned, protective edge. And whether it was old-fashioned of her or not, Callie softened to the concept of him wanting to protect her.

That's a dangerous way to respond, Callie Humbold.

Gideon went on. 'What if they harmed you or Mary, I mean? The possibilities are endless. Attempts to extort money from the Deveraux family, bad press, bad behaviour, bad associations any of them have formed—'

'We've taken care to keep their marriage plans secret.' Callie could at least assure him of this. 'We gave most of the guest house staff this weekend off the island. The family all understand the need for discretion, and the remaining staff are completely trustworthy.' Callie hesitated. 'I assume Heather Stiller—?'

'She's gone.' On a boat back to the mainland by now. Or, if not, his skipper would collect her soon. Gideon hadn't thought to watch for the boat's arrival. 'She doesn't know the bridegroom's identity anyway.' He frowned. 'That's not the point. You're vulnerable here if anything ever—'

'It won't.' Callie hadn't found it entirely easy to have the MacKay brothers and all their extended family arrive en masse. But they seemed like reasonable people, mostly. If somewhat rough and ready at times…

No. This was all going to be fine. Mary knew what she was doing, and Callie must trust in Gideon's aunt's judgment.

Right. Callie drew a stabilising breath. 'Try to understand, Gideon, there's nothing to worry about.'

'I understand perfectly.' Gideon's face took on an implacable set. 'Mary's allowed herself to be taken in by some airy-fairy feeling that she's in love with the man and it's blinded her to everything else. That kind of attitude is dangerous.'

That was what Gideon would say, wasn't it? Never mind that there'd once been another person who'd thought herself in love. Never mind that Callie had softened to him moments earlier. This was the real Gideon. She needed to remember that.

He was kind when he rejected you, Callie. And you can't judge him for being worried now.

They'd retraced their steps along the beach during their discussion. Callie turned to Gideon. 'Promise me you'll simply enjoy this wedding—support your aunt in it and be happy for her?' Maybe if she kept emotion out of her request she would get somewhere with it. Maybe if she resolved this she would stop thinking about the rest.

But Gideon didn't give her what she needed. Instead, he shook his head. 'Callie, I can't—'

'Callie?' Mac called her name from the front steps of the guest house and the moment was fully lost. 'The decorations have been delivered for the gazebo. I got them to leave the boxes there, but there's a bit of a crisis going on in the kitchen at the moment. Do you have time to take care of the delivery?'

Callie sucked back a sigh.

'Absolutely.'

She waved Mac back with a determined smile, and turned towards the gazebo perched high above the beach on a knoll.

Before she started in that direction, she turned to the man at her side and tried one last time. 'Your promise, Gideon. If you can't give it to me, maybe you should get on a boat out of here as well.'

'I'm not leaving.' Gideon fell into step beside her as she walked towards the gazebo. 'I'm not going

anywhere until I've spoken with my aunt. If she needs talking out of this marriage, I'll do it. For her sake.' He hesitated, frowned, then added, 'And for yours. You may not be a child any more, but I still feel a sense of responsibility for your welfare.'

CHAPTER THREE

'MARY should be back quite soon, so you'll get your chance to talk to her.'

Callie flung herself into the task of unpacking the first box of supplies in the gazebo. She couldn't really be cross with Gideon when even in his immovable state he showed that he cared for her and for his aunt. It just would have been better if Mary had been here to speak with him!

'Had Mary planned for long to go into Melbourne today?' Gideon moved in to help Callie unpack as he waited for her to answer his question.

Callie turned with her hands full of ribbons and table flounces. 'Actually, it was a last-minute decision.'

'She left you holding the bag?' His voice was deep, and he couldn't help looking at her with all those bits of lace in her slender hands. Even in her practical clothes she looked feminine and…desirable.

Not a thought you should pursue, Deveraux. Callie might be all grown up now, and fair game to any man who found her attractive—and for some reason Gideon didn't like to think of that, either—but she was not fair game to a man who wouldn't love her.

He didn't know how to do that—love a woman. At this age, and with a marriage behind him that hadn't exactly left him devastated when it ended, Gideon figured he didn't have what it took to love truly, madly, deeply.

He was too practical for that—too determined to keep his best interests safe.

And he'd hurt Callie once already. He'd tried not to think about it, had tried to attribute that night to Callie pursuing some random teenage crush, which no doubt she had been, but in the throes of that crush she'd had her heart on her sleeve, and that was the one thing he hadn't been able to take into safekeeping for her.

If circumstances had been different…

But they hadn't been. He hadn't been. Something inside him ached as he thought this. Well, it was the truth.

Gideon turned his thoughts back to the conversation at hand. 'You shouldn't have been left to introduce me to Mac.'

Callie sighed, and her shoulders slumped for a moment before she straightened them and pinned a smile back on her face. 'Maybe not, but Mary doesn't like confrontations.' She started to attach the table flounces to the long tables already placed around the room.

Gideon thought about that shoulder slump and his voice softened. 'You've probably been working since dawn. At least let me help you while I'm waiting to speak with my aunt. There must be something I can do.'

He thought she would refuse his offer, but in the end she gave a single nod of her head. 'Thank you. I could do with the extra pair of hands—just not forty-seven sets of them at once, if you know what I mean. It has been a long couple of days, though I don't begrudge any of it for Mary.'

They got to work. Time passed, and Gideon began to tease out details about the time Callie had spent here with Mary over the years. As she started to talk more freely he got a picture of how much his aunt

meant to her—and how much he had kept himself out of both their lives.

He watched Callie spread cloths over tables, and he arranged rows of chairs just so at the other end of the gazebo under her eagle eye. She folded napkins into swans, he placed cutlery with as much precision as the best of the best waiting staff. The need to ensure her future was secure and that she would be happy in it crystallised inside him.

'You'd truly be happy here without Mary? You haven't thought about how isolated you'd be, carrying on here by yourself?'

'Not isolated. We have good staff. Some of them are dear friends as well.' Callie started to buzz past him. 'I'll be fine. I appreciate your concern, but I'm all grown up now. You don't need to worry about me, Gideon.'

'I've felt responsible since the day I pulled your uncle clear and stopped that tractor from crushing him.' Gideon caught her gently by the arm and registered warm, soft flesh beneath the edge of her T-shirt. The touch of Callie that he hadn't experienced since that night…

'My uncle—'Her eyes darkened to moss-green, and her gaze slowly dropped from his eyes to his mouth and lingered there.

Just like that Gideon was back on the estate, in his apartment's living room with his arms full of her, his mind scrambling as he kissed her and forgot about his promises to Dianna and Callie's age and everything else that should have stopped him—until the doorbell rang and Dianna called his name and he and Callie sprang apart and Callie rushed outside. He'd left Dianna there and followed Callie, explained that he'd made a mistake and shouldn't have touched her, he was sorry, she just had a girlish crush…

'Your uncle?' he prompted, and told himself he must not draw her close, could not possibly want to taste her again as he had seven years ago.

'Reid…He shouldn't have made you feel responsible for me.' A soft flush filled Callie's face and made her eyes soften and darken even further. 'To say you'd inherited me because you saved his life, to leave me to you—even if only informally—in his will.'

Gideon had felt responsible. But he had never minded that. 'It doesn't—'

'Well, you're not responsible any more.' Callie drew away from him, broke the contact of his fingers circling her upper arm. 'I can look after myself now, and have done so for quite a long while.'

That should have been a matter of relief for him. So why did he feel she'd taken an emotional step away from him with her words?

Callie went on. 'As for the rest, Mac is reformed and rehabilitated, he loves Mary, and if it's Mary's choice to be with him—well, their love for each other will be all they need to be happy.' Her voice trembled just a little—just enough to let him know she wasn't as composed or calm as she wante
d him to believe. 'Can't you please try to see that, Gideon?'

'It's not that I don't want to respect your point of view, but Mac—'

'You're looking at this with your head, not your heart. Your unemotional attitude about love between a man and a woman—' She broke off and bit her lip. 'I'm sorry, but you said you didn't love Dianna, and that wasn't what marriage was going to be about for you. That night…'

That night he had forgotten his commitment to Dianna completely. Until it had come back to him, saved him at the last moment from taking Callie to his bed and creating a situation they both wouldn't have been able to deal with.

Something inside Gideon stilled even as her words hit home, challenging something deep within him that he didn't want to examine; yet he couldn't stop his words. 'You don't know what I feel—what emotions are inside me.'

For the first time in his socially acceptable, upper-echelon, controlled, plotted and planned, heir to millions, owner of billions life, Gideon wondered if he was quite as certain about what he wanted as he had always believed. If he was as incapable of giving and receiving as he had believed because of his relationship with Dianna and his lack of feeling true loss when she left.

Callie chewed her lip. 'That night I embarrassed—'

'You were beautiful.' He spoke over the top of her, out of something deep inside him that he'd pushed away for seven years. Out of a need to assure her that he had…'I wanted you too much.'

And now he'd said too much.

Green eyes locked with his gaze while sparks arced between them. They were back there, but more than that they were here and now…and here and now was somehow not at all the same.

Gideon became aware of just how close they were standing, almost nose to stuck-in-the-air pert nose. His body was bowed towards hers, wanting to be close. Wanting…her. His mouth was halfway there already and he had no desire to stop that forward progress.

Callie's breath caught as she stared up into his eyes and Gideon thought, Why shouldn't I?

'Gideon. Darling boy!' His aunt's voice sounded as she rushed into the gazebo.

Callie sprang away from him as though caught in an illicit act. He'd wanted it a great deal more than he had thought he might. Just as she had when they had been caught, or almost, by Dianna.

Gideon wanted to tug her close again and finish that act. But Callie had a soft glow on her face, an even softer expression in her eyes as she struggled to pull herself together.

And the chorus from seven years ago came back to him: Don't hurt her. Don't hurt her with what you don't have in you to give her. Don't take your limitations to her. She deserves so much more than that.

He did have those limits. His relationship with Dianna, his cold, calculated choice of Dianna was proof of that. And then Dianna had moved on to a colder, more calculated choice. Ironic, really.

Gideon turned to Mary, forced his attention to her. He couldn't believe what he'd been about to do with the woman still standing so close to him. 'I'm glad to see you, Mary. You look well.'

Indeed, as Gideon finally looked at his aunt properly he saw that she was glowing.

She had a scarf over her wavy brown hair, and now she pulled it off and smiled. 'I am well, dear boy, and all the happier for seeing you.' At this statement her smile did falter slightly, before she pinned it back on with renewed determination. 'Mac said I'd find you here with Callie.'

At least the other man had sent Mary to him. The mention of MacKay's name reminded Gideon of the reason—the forty-seven reasons, in fact—he needed to speak with Mary, whether she had a glow on her or not. Whether Callie was standing beside him glowering at him in warning or not.

'Can we chat, Mary? I met your fiancé.' Gideon glanced at Callie and registered her prickly disapproval. 'Callie introduced us, and I have to say I'm a little concerned about your relationship with MacKay. How long have you known him, for example? What do you know of his life in the past, and since he…?'

'Got out of jail?' Mary shrugged her shoulders. 'Don't feel uncomfortable saying it, Gideon. I certainly

don’t feel any concern about Mac’s history or where he is in himself now. He’s a good man.’

‘He could potentially be dangerous to your health and well-being, and so could his family.’

Mary’s calm expression didn’t waver. ‘That’s not how it is with Mac.’ She paused, and her expression firmed. ‘Give me your presence at my marriage and your good wishes. That’s all I’m asking of you, Gideon. Indeed, it’s all I want.’

Gideon passed a hand over the back of his head. ‘I don’t want you to be hurt.’

‘And I won’t be. You have to trust in that, Gideon. Trust it with your heart, for a change, rather than trying to see everything with your head.’

Mary glanced towards Callie and gestured at Gideon’s chest. ‘It’s past time you started thinking with the organ housed deep inside there.’

Callie’s glance met his, and he remembered wanting to kiss her.

That hadn’t involved his heart. It hadn’t. But it had involved him not thinking logically. He turned back to Mary. ‘I prefer to stick to facts and trust in analytical judgement.’

‘Oh, Gideon. You do make me sad sometimes.’ Mary sighed and patted his arm, then turned to Callie and asked her how the wedding preparations were going.

End of discussion, her actions seemed to say. Did Gideon realise that for Mary this discussion was now over? He’d expressed his concerns. Mary had rejected them.

Callie watched Gideon chafe at Mary’s change of topic as she answered his aunt’s questions. In detail. With enthusiasm. Because this was Mary’s ‘day before the wedding’ and she deserved it to be exactly what she wanted it to be.

And if answering Mary’s questions helped take Callie’s mind off the sadness of Gideon’s stance on marriage, took the attention away from ‘Gideon and Callie’ and how much they weren’t any part of these questions or answers, then that was a good thing. Wasn’t it?

‘So, I’d like you to get quite a few cuttings of that, if you could, dear. You can take Gideon to help carry it all back here.’ Mary dusted her hands off, as though she had just organised something that would greatly please her.

Callie had listened, but just with part of her, while the rest of her remained overly aware of Gideon.

Mary wanted her to take foliage cuttings from native bushes that only grew in one place on the other side of the island. She wanted lots of those cuttings because she’d done a reading, and the cards had told her the foliage should be used to scent the gazebo for the ceremony.

Well, it would be a break from the intensity of the past moments with Gideon, Callie supposed!

Callie pinned a smile on her face. ‘Of course I’ll get the cuttings for you, Mary. But I can harvest them myself. I don’t need help.’

‘Oh, do take Gideon, Callie.’ Mary waved her hand. ‘I’ll feel happier knowing you have company. Yes.’ She cast a single repressive glance in her nephew’s direction. ‘That sorts everything out.’

Right. Mary didn’t want to talk with Gideon any more right now, so she was foisting him off on Callie.

One glance in Gideon’s direction showed that if he stayed here he would pursue the conversation further with Mary. Which meant Callie had no choice but to do what Mary wanted.

Callie gave in as graciously as she could. How bad could a bit more time in Gideon's company be? She glanced at the looming overcast sky, thought about the weather predictions of storms for tomorrow, and crossed her fingers behind her back.

They didn't need gale force winds and a storm that could wreak havoc over the entire island. Not on the wedding day. That was one more worry on Callie's mind. And Callie didn't need to be fixated on the thought that Gideon had been about to kiss her when Mary had interrupted them. They must both have been temporarily insane to almost allow that to happen. The possibility was a storm warning of another kind altogether!

'What replacement job will you offer Heather Stiller now she's lost the chance to manage the guest house here?'

Callie posed the question as she clipped another portion of bush and passed it to Gideon, who placed it carefully into the canvas carrier at their feet. The aroma, a lovely blend of spice and evergreen, filled the air around them.

That air was heavy with the approach of rain, and that worried Callie. She glanced at the darkening sky. 'I don't want Mary's day spoiled tomorrow. I hope it stays fine. The storm warnings haven't been great, to be honest. I'm hoping Mary hasn't been checking, otherwise she'll be worrying, too.'

'I'll find a place for Heather.' Gideon would worry about that when he got back to Melbourne. 'I have enough business enterprises that I'm sure I'll find something that will satisfy her. She joined one of my Melbourne-based business companies about six months ago, so I don't know a huge amount about her working history, but her ambitions are obvious and her current qualifications read well.' He, too, glanced at the sky. 'It does look a bit black, but perhaps there's just some rain on the way?'

Gideon reached forward to pick a piece of greenery from Callie's shoulder. He inhaled the scent of it before he let it drift through his fingers to the ground, and then seemed to realise he was standing rather close to her and backed away a step.

Callie lowered her gaze to the secateurs in her hands. She'd liked his closeness too much. She snipped another sprig off the bush. The wind whipped at her hair and clothes and plastered Gideon's clothes against his body. He had a rather splendid body, Callie thought, and then reminded herself not to think about things like that.

But Callie stood there, secateurs in hand, unable to move. His gaze captured hers, and then it was all there again.

After a loaded silence, and a sigh from him that was rather like acceptance, the secateurs were taken from her grasp and dropped into the tote.

I need to know…' His voice dipped, deepened, and his hands came up to close over her upper arms. 'Should I have sent you here seven years ago? Maybe there was some other way to protect—'

Her.

To protect her from what he'd seen as a bad thing at that time. And it would have been. Whether his feelings had been involved or not, he had been committed to Dianna—though Callie hadn't known that until he'd told her they were engaged to be married, that they'd kept the fact low profile because he hadn't wanted media attention.

His concern touched her, softened her when she already felt too vulnerable to him. But Callie fought to give him a coherent response. Not easy with his hands on her.

All she could find was, 'I'm not that young girl.'

It sounded too open, perhaps too needy, and she didn't want him to think she needed him, because that insinuated something more than attraction, and that depth of feeling for him was not a place she was prepared to go. Not when she believed him incapable of loving with all his heart.

I didn't really love him. It was just a young girl's imagination, even if it felt much deeper than that at the time.

Callie forced her gaze to drop to the tote bag. 'We have enough cuttings. We should head back.'

Head back. Avoid lingering here with him. Avoid the temptation of this moment away from everyone, just the two of them, alone on an isolated stretch of the island.

Gideon let go of her and lifted the bag.

A fat drop of rain fell, then another and another, and then a deluge of it. She'd known it was coming and she'd let it creep up on her anyway.

Rather like the feelings that had driven her to Gideon's door when she was young enough and believed she loved him enough to expose herself that way. She had been so sure she could seduce him, draw his attention, and that when she had it he would somehow miraculously realise he loved her.

So silly.

'There's an empty cottage beyond the rise.' She blinked splashes of rain out of her eyes, felt the sting of the droplets against her cheeks and nose and mouth, the whip of a wind that was indeed stronger than she would have liked.

They stumbled up the small hill against the wind; against the rain that soaked them in the space of time it took them to hit the top of that rise. The cottage was just beyond it.

Callie pushed the door open, and Gideon stumbled in behind her and slapped it shut again. Their breaths sounded loud in the sudden stillness inside those four small walls.

There was no furniture. Just bare faded walls and a wooden floor. A bank of uncurtained windows to one side, what used to be a kitchenette, gutted now, in the far part of the room.

Maybe it was the sudden onset of the storm that made her glance out of those windows and feel as though they were being watched.

They stood there dripping with rain, facing each other. Gideon had set the tote bag onto the floor at his feet; all his focus was on her, and Callie forgot that odd feeling. Instead, something in his expression made her heart stutter.

'Mary,' she said. There was something that had to be said about Mary. Callie resisted the urge to retreat a step while her concentration shattered, but all she could do was look into blue eyes that had darkened and focused so intensely on her.

'Mary…?' He reached out his hand and wiped a drip of rain from her cheek. His fingers lingered, cupped her face.

'Mary—your aunt. She…' Do not press into his touch. Don't do it, don't do it.

Callie pressed. Closed her eyes and then forced them open again, hoping somehow she'd have managed to break this…whatever it was that had her standing here, unable to move away from him, wanting all sorts of inexplicable things she probably shouldn't want.

What did she mean, probably? She knew she shouldn't want those things.

'Mary is in love. With Mac.'

Callie drew a breath and his hand dropped to his side. She told herself it was all right now, but the rain outside got heavier and pounded on the roof, and in here it was filled with quiet and intimacy, and that was not all right.

'They've been planning this wedding for a year now. They're committed. She knows everything there is to know about Mac. Just…you know…just to reassure you about things. I should have said all that at the start. I was worried about keeping my job here. I'm glad you're going to let me do that.'

Callie forced her concentration to remain on Mary's situation, not on the intimacy of her own.

'If you investigate Mac, which you really shouldn't, your investigation won't reveal anything that will surprise Mary, because Mac has been completely up-front with her. He spent the first six months of their courtship doing his best to make her push him aside, after all his truthfulness about his past. I watched that happening.'

'I don't want to breach Mac's privacy, Callie.' Gideon's brows drew down. 'But I do have to be certain Mary will be safe.'

'I know.' Callie did know. She knew because she knew Gideon. She had cared about him all the time she'd lived with her uncle. 'Can't you take my assurance on the issue?'

He pushed back a sigh. 'The wedding is tomorrow. I'm going to contact an investigator I know and set him onto this immediately. He's discreet, and I expect to have information from him by nightfall—or early tomorrow at the least.'

'I see. Well, I guess I can't blame you for caring about her.'

'And about you.'

Water dripped down the side of his cheek as he gave a reluctant sigh. Callie's fingers twitched with the need to reach up and trace the line left by that rivulet of water.

Her heart acknowledged something. He cared about Mary—loved her. That was why he felt so concerned about his aunt. He wanted her to be happy and safe.

And don't you think maybe he felt the same way about you?

Something inside Callie softened despite herself. 'I truly believe Mary will be okay, Gid. If I didn't believe that I would have called you long ago and asked for help to protect her. And I believe I'll be quite safe, too.'

The planes and angles of his face softened as though that diminutive use of his name had got past his defences. 'Callie—'

She did back away then, when he spoke her name in that soft, deep tone. Backed a step physically, tried to back up emotionally as well.

'It'll all be over tomorrow and you'll leave again.'

And then Callie could get on with her life and not be confused by feelings about him that she didn't want to have, hadn't wanted to admit she had, still couldn't consider she had.

'I don't want—' Gideon was at a loss as to what to say as he felt an intensity inside himself that he

couldn’t allow to be there, and yet it still was.

A big drip of rain splashed onto his face and dribbled down his nose. Gideon glanced upwards. ‘The roof’s leaking.’

‘Yes. The rain is hammering down, but the wind seems to have died down, don’t you think? That may be a good sign.’ Callie’s gaze tracked over his hair, face, chest, and came back to meet his eyes. ‘You look quite bedraggled, actually. Your shirt’s going to wrinkle.’ She gave a half-reluctant laugh and swiped the drip from the end of his nose.

And Gideon took a really good look at her for the first time since they’d come into the shelter of the cottage. He knew they were standing in an empty room, and the place smelled musty. He had noticed those things—peripherally at least. But now he noticed Callie.

The rat’s tail her ponytail had become. Her face with its freckles and not a scrap of make-up. Her milky skin and soaked orange shirt and soggy dungarees. Her big green eyes locked to his gaze.

It just welled up in him then. The same need that had hit him earlier.

‘Callie.’ He murmured her name, and somehow she was reaching for him, and he was reaching for her, and his lips closed over hers.

All he could register was the taste of her. The feel of soft lips beneath his, mouldin
g to his. He couldn’t force himself away from that kiss. He had to have it. He didn’t know how she did that to him. Put him so far out of control so fast.

Gideon’s lips on Callie’s brought all kinds of emotions to the surface in her.

Her heart squeezed.

His eyelids drifted closed and he inhaled. His mouth softened against hers as the kiss went to a whole other level—one that held her spellbound, lips to his lips, as everything within her reached for this moment.

Gideon sighed his pleasure.

Callie was sensual in his arms, beautiful and…and hungry in a way that heated the blood in his veins as her hands shaped his shoulders, his upper arms and chest. He realised he’d crushed her close and could feel every inch of her body pressed to his.

Gideon tipped her head back and deepened the kiss. His senses took over. One hand drifted down her spine to the base of her back. The other cupped her neck, shaped the outer curves of her breasts, her waist and hips.

‘God, Callie.’

The heat had washed over them so fast, so strong. As Gideon realised that he finally made himself slow down. Enough to stop him crushing her close. Enough to ease off on a kiss that had become all the most tempting kinds of ravishment—of the woman in his arms and of his own senses.

He didn’t want to lose this closeness with her. But he forced himself to draw back.

Cloudy green eyes looked into his face.

‘What are we doing, Callie?’

Gideon wished he knew the answer.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘I DON’T think there’s going to be much more rain—’

‘We should go. The rain has stopped—’

They both spoke at once, stepped back—way back.

Gideon glanced out of the windows. Anything other than looking at the kiss-softened woman he’d held so recently in his arms.

Callie did the same. Though he wondered if she registered the view outside any better than he did.

Hands dropped away. Bodies that had warmed against each other chilled back to awareness of wet, uncomfortable clothing and the musty smell of the cottage, the earthy, pine and spice scent of the foliage they had cut for Mary.

Gideon felt all this inside himself. Then Callie shivered, and he wanted to wrap her into his arms and keep her safe and secure, and kiss her again and more…

Kissing her was not smart. And ‘more’ was out of the question utterly. If they did that he’d want her again. And again and again and again. He wasn’t stupid enough that he didn’t know that. And Callie had held her heart out to him once already. He hadn’t been able to take it then, and she was still a generous, giving person.

She would understand now that she wasn’t in love with him, as she’d believed she was back then, but she was still capable of becoming emotionally attached to him. And he…He wasn’t good at that. Like his parents, who had a calm but unemotional and distant relationship with each other, Gideon didn’t do well at the kind of intimacy that needed to come from a soul-deep level. He’d simply never found it inside himself for a woman. If it wasn’t there, it wasn’t there.

‘Callie, I can’t—I don’t have—’

‘Please.’ She cut one slender hand through the air. ‘We let ourselves get a little carried away. I guess that’s natural when we’ve been there once before. You know—curiosity, old history…Let’s go back. There’s so much still to do, and I want to check in for another weather report with the bureau.’

‘Yes. That’s what we should do.’ Gideon picked up the canvas tote, moved to the door of the cottage and opened it, and figured the tightness in his chest was an after-effect of realising he’d gone somewhere with Callie that he shouldn’t have. It had to be that.

‘You should be looking for a nice guy. Someone your age who can give you what you need.’ The words came out whether he should have let them or not. But Callie should try to find someone to…to love her. She deserved that. She needed that. She didn’t have that. And if she had that she would be purely and simply out of bounds. Not that he should view her any differently but out of bounds now…

‘I’m twenty-five. I can choose someone any age that I want.’ Callie stepped past him through the door. Maybe it was the glare she cast his way, or the emergence of the sun from behind the clouds, or the fact her hair was still damp, but she seemed to glow all over…

She’d stomped quite a way from him before he tugged the door shut and followed, using his longer stride to catch up with her. She glowed. Appealed. Made him want to take her into his arms all over again. Callie did all of those things.

‘For your information, I’ve looked for relationships.’ Her words were low, and, yes, irritated. And something else he couldn’t define as she turned her face away to look out to sea. ‘Living on an island

doesn't stop me from spending time socialising—both here and in Melbourne, and in other places when I feel like it.'

Callie couldn't look at Gideon. If she did, he might see all the feelings in her eyes. His kisses had swept her away. The landing when he'd put an end to them had been bumpy. She was too conscious of him still, and that was dangerous.

Back to the point. She enjoyed socialising and she'd done relationships. Well, she'd done dating.

There was no need to admit she'd struggled to care enough about any man to get beyond dating, to find much more than fleeting pleasure during the one or two times those relationships had gone that way.

'Anyway, you haven't settled into another relationship since Dianna. Not a serious one.'

'How do you—?' He broke off to help her over an old fallen tree limb.

Callie let him help her, and then took care to shift away from him again—because his touch on her was somewhat problematical to her concentration still. But she was going to take care of that!

'You're a billionaire bachelor, you have business interests that put you in the papers all the time, and your whole family is of interest to the media anyway because of your combined wealth.' She didn't add that he was also gorgeous and appealing, and of interest for those reasons as well. He had to know he was on every 'Top 100' list in existence for reasons that included his appeal as a male of the species. Instead she said, 'I doubt you'd hide any kind of significant relationship from the public eye for long.'

That was enough. And she hadn't deliberately followed his business interests or his attendance at this glitzy function or that one. The coverage was just there, and she noticed it.

Sure, Callandra. Whatever you say.

'I need to get back to work. Get focused on this wedding and make sure everything is done in preparation for tomorrow.' Callie picked up her pace. But she couldn't outrun her thoughts, or her consciousness of Gideon striding along at her side.

He'd kissed her, and she had felt such tenderness in her heart for him when it happened. One minute she'd been laughing, the next her heart had been cracking open and letting him most of the way in, while her senses had simply flown away at his every touch and caress.

Even if that had only been the upsurge of a long-time affection, it was dangerous. She had to retreat from that emotional position. From her awareness of him altogether. And she had to do it fast, because Gideon wasn't opening up to her in the same way.

He wasn't even capable of trusting her judgement over Mac and his family. And he wanted to throw her at the first stranger who came along and offered a nice, secure relationship.

At this sobering reminder, Callie drew a fortifying breath. 'Let's just get this wedding done, so life can go back to normal for both of us. That's what's going to be best.'

It might have been nice for her to go straight to the gazebo, put the foliage in place as Mary wanted it done. Preferably while Gideon went to the guest house and did anything that didn't involve being with her.

Instead, a group of Mac's family spilled out onto the steps of the guest house as they approached. It had to be Mac's three brothers, didn't it? They we
re life-weathered men, strong and muscular, and somewhat life-roughened.

'I see the rain caught you, Callie?'

The one named Andrew grazed his hand over his shaved head, revealing a tattooed underarm in the process. Callie particularly liked the serpent with its jaws wide open.

'Yes. I want to get a weather report. What's brought you all outside?'

'None of us can stay indoors for more than an hour at a stretch.' This comment came from Damien, the youngest of all the brothers. He gave a grin that didn't quite reach the world-weariness in his eyes. 'Been that way since jail.'

'Do the crime, do the time' The third brother shrugged his shoulders. 'We learned—didn't we, boys?'

And on that note…

'Gideon,' she murmured, 'I'd like you to meet Mac's brothers.' She introduced each one. 'Mac's happy to have his family around him for this special time, and it's a rare opportunity. He doesn't see a whole lot of his brothers.'

She hoped Gideon understood the subtext—the fact that the Joneses didn't spend a lot of time massed in one place—but he didn't look particularly reassured.

After brief hellos, the first brother turned thick shoulders in the direction of the doors. 'Two of our wives almost came to blows over how to make the sauce for one of tomorrow's desserts. It could get ugly if we don't supervise. Better get back in there.'

They disappeared, laughing at what Callie hoped was a joke.

'I have to find out if we're still on storm alert,' she said. As far as the weather was concerned, at least. Callie wasn't sure if she should think about possible storms among the Jones family!

Callie followed the men into the guest house, and prayed that tomorrow would dawn fine and mild and the forty-seven people inside the guest house would feel equally mellow and mild.

Someone shouted from inside the kitchen, and someone else shouted back. So far her hopes weren't looking overly realistic.

Gideon's mouth tightened and he strode purposefully in that direction. 'I think I'll meet everyone else now.'

'Oh, good.' Callie forced the words out between teeth that were inclined to want to chew her lip. 'That sounds like a great idea.' She bolted towards the office. 'I'll just check the weather while you do that.'

Hopefully Mary would be in the kitchen, and she would be able to introduce Gideon to all those lovely people—who really were lovely people, including Mac.

Being boisterous didn't mean they were scary.

Or anything.

Honest!

CHAPTER FIVE

THE weather warning was even more severe on the morning of the wedding. The authorities couldn't

say which way it would go, and most often storms passed by the island, but the air was heavy, thick and still. Callie hoped for the best—or, if not that, for the worst to hold off at least until after the ceremony was over.

Mary looked beautiful, in a simple cream sheath dress, with multi-hued flowers in her bouquet and in her hair.

Callie stood to Mary's left and let the words of the ceremony wash over her. She'd given up all pretence of fighting off tears the moment Mac first looked into Mary's eyes and began his vows. The sound of waves on the beach wafted through the gazebo's wide-open doors as Mac continued to speak. A flash of something caught Callie's eye through those opened doors. The glint of sun on a bird's wings in the distance? She wasn't sure.

Mac caught Mary's hand and held it in his, and his voice deepened to an emotion-roughened rumble. 'And I will love and cherish you for ever, and never forget the gift you are to me. I won't ever forget, Mary.'

The celebrant smiled and nodded, and pronounced them husband and wife, and Callie surreptitiously wiped the tears from beneath her eyes. She couldn't let herself look at Gideon, who stood on Mac's other side. That would be just too difficult. It would tug at her heartstrings too much, and she didn't want to ask herself why that was.

Mary and Mac kissed, and when they broke apart the family gave a boisterous cheer of approval.

They walked down the makeshift aisle, with Mac receiving back-slaps and Mary receiving kisses on her cheek.

Callie followed, with her bridesmaid's bouquet clutched in her fingers and the rustle of pale blue silk whispering against her legs. She tried so hard to focus on those things.

Tried, but couldn't. Because her thoughts were on the man at her side, who now had her hand tucked through his arm.

'Mary looks beautiful.' Gideon's voice was rough, resigned, but tender as he watched Mary, glowing on her new husband's arm. He was still worried. That, too, sounded in his tone.

Somehow, knowing the service had moved him moved Callie, too. It softened her to him—and that was such a bad thing to have happen.

'The celebrant was good, hey, Mac?' Andrew Jones let his pride show as he addressed his brother. 'I know how to find someone who can do the job and keep quiet about it.'

Mac nodded his head. 'For Mary, it has to stay quiet. I don't want a media circus for her, so it's good to know this person won't talk now or later.' His voice held reserve as well as appreciation, but he produced a smile for his brother. 'You did well, Andrew. I do appreciate it.'

Just for a moment Gideon's expression gave away the fact that he was on the same page with Mac when it came to preserving Mary's privacy over this marriage. The couple intended to keep a low profile always; Callie had assured Gideon of that before they went their separate ways last night.

‘Mary does look beautiful, and years younger than she is. Happiness has taken age off her.’ Callie hoped her words would shift Gideon’s focus from the potential for disaster involved in this marriage.

Yes, Callie had her concerns, in certain ways. She’d worked with Mary to ensure secrecy. She’d met Mac’s family and worried, and hoped Mary truly would be safe amongst them. In the end she’d concluded that Mac, despite his ways, quieter than some of the others, would do everything necessary to ensure Mary’s security—even from his own relatives if need be.

‘Are you okay now, Callie?’ Gideon dipped his head to search her face.

She nodded self-consciously. She hadn’t expected to feel raw like this when Mary said her vows and bound herself to Mac. It wasn’t because Callie feared Mac wouldn’t love Mary enough. It was because she knew he would.

‘I’m fine. I’m happy for Mary. She looks lovely—glowing and happy, inside and out.’

‘You look just as beautiful, Callie.’ Gideon spoke the low words and squeezed her hand.

For a moment there was a sadness in him, and Callie’s heart hurt—because she was remembering another wedding day, and how she’d taken herself away to a remote part of the island and grieved alone because she simply couldn’t share it.

She had pushed that grieving down so far…

‘Callie?’ Gideon’s hand folded over hers. Shadows filled his eyes—concern for her—but he didn’t understand and she was glad. She didn’t want him to understand, because that would mean he knew…

Knew what?

That she’d…she’d cared about him back then, that was all. Simply cared about him.

Callie drew a shaken breath. And then there were people all around and the moment passed.

They rearranged chairs around tables and ate their buffet dinner in the gazebo while the sun set and darkness fell. Tiny rows of fairy lights twinkled overhead on the domed ceiling. The scent of Mary’s special foliage and hundreds of flowers filled the large room.

‘MacKay’s relatives have done a good job with the catering. The meal was excellent.’ Gideon made the observation into Callie’s ear as they watched the newly married couple take to the small area set aside for dancing.

It was a conciliatory statement, and Callie treated it as such. She was relieved that he hadn’t been able to read her thoughts earlier, anyway.

‘Yes. I’m glad they went with the buffet idea. It kept it that little bit more informal, and allowed for a wider variety of foods.’ As she spoke the words the music started. Not a bridal waltz, no—not that for Mac and Mary.

Instead they danced the Charleston. The couple had practised the dance for months, and Callie couldn’t help smiling as she watched them. She observed a look of anticipatory unease on Gideon’s face as he

glanced her way.

'Oh, don't worry. That won't be expected of us.' Callie laid a consoling hand on his arm, the first voluntary touch she'd given him today—though not the first touch they had exchanged.

You don't want to think about that, Callandra. You haven't been noticing all those necessary touches, and the few unnecessary ones he's given you.

And you certainly haven't been affected by them.

Right. Of course she hadn't. Callie's fingers tightened against Gideon's arm, and then she drew away abruptly. The flicker of intensity in his eyes didn't help her cause. But why was he looking at her like that after they'd both agreed that yesterday's kiss was a mistake and they were over all that? Not that he meant he'd ever been other than over it. He'd just been momentarily distracted yesterday, nothing more.

What had she been talking about?

'The next dance will just be a regular one that anyone can do.' Though it would be expected that they'd be the next couple on the floor, before anyone else joined in.

Well, Callie could manage dancing with Gideon in front of a bunch of Mac's relatives. No problem. No drama. No big deal.

The music changed as she had those thoughts.

'I think that's our cue.' Gideon got to his feet and held out his hand.

'We haven't danced together before.' Callie placed her hand in his and got to her feet, and suddenly her heart was beating fast and she was breathless.

He took that hand in a strong clasp and led her onto the floor. He turned her into his arms. He didn't comment on her statement of the obvious, but his hands were gentle as they held her.

Callie should have been conscious of people watching them. The sounds of laughter and boisterous t alk should have impinged. Yet she could only feel Gideon's hold on her, acknowledge how she relaxed into that hold, welcomed it.

She could only notice the man who held her.

There were so many sensations to notice. His hand holding hers. His other hand high in the centre of her back. The bridesmaid's dress had spaghetti straps and a not at all plunging back, but it left enough skin bare that his fingers touched her flesh. What Callie couldn't let herself notice was how right it felt to be held by him.

'Let's see if we can do this.' Gideon's low words were clearly intended to be jovial. The deep, husky tone of them somewhat put paid to that intention.

Callie imagined she murmured some appropriate assent. Once her hand rose to rest on his shoulder she could no longer focus on words. His shoulder beneath her fingers was rock-hard. She could feel the outline of bone and muscle, and when they began to dance could feel every movement of his body

through that one touch, even without the sense of his fingers gripping her other hand.

Other couples joined them on the floor.

There were more dances and changes of partners over the next hour, and pieces of wedding cake and wonderful coffee, and far too much champagne flowing, but Callie never lost the memory of that first dance in Gideon's arms. Never lost her awareness of him at all.

Mac and Mary slipped away quietly, after speaking with her and Gideon briefly. Mary didn't throw her bouquet, Mac didn't throw a garter, and Callie was kind of glad about that. She didn't want to think of Gideon throwing a garter at a wedding years ago.

Mary and Mac left by special chartered boat—a pre-arranged deal to get them away after nightfall.

Somewhat similar to Gideon's arrival, except he'd told her he'd simply bought a boat to get here. Only he would do that!

The party went on until the early hours, and turned into somewhat of a family reunion. A very loud one.

Callie had to see the party through to the end. And Gideon chose to see it through with her.

'One more dance, folks.'

The DJ set another vinyl onto the turntable and a sweet poignant song flowed through the gazebo. The warm mellow sound of the music lent it an intimacy that Callie did her best to fight. And no, her best was not good enough.

'There's something about music played the "real" way—on a turntable, with the scratch of a needle.'

Gideon took Callie into his arms for this one last dance and told himself it was fine—because he'd made it through the evening, made it through the myriad temptations of Callie so close at his side.

Callie was more temptation than he wanted to consider or acknowledge. He didn't know why. Except for yesterday's kiss…

But still he held her for the final dance, and his hands touched her gently because that was what she drew from him.

'Seven years ago I sent you away from me.' He murmured the words against the hair that was piled on her head in artfully arranged Titian curls. He'd sent her away for her sake. Hadn't he? 'Now I'm wondering…'

'You were getting ready to marry Dianna.' She glanced up into his eyes. 'I embarrassed myself that night—a young girl blurting things she shouldn't have.'

'I was a lot older, and I have to take my share of the blame for what happened.' He was glad to have the incident out in the open at long last. 'I could have dealt with it better at the time. But you tempted me then. You…still tempt me now.'

The music faded to silence then, and they broke apart. Maybe it was as well, because she was a lot of

temptation in his arms.

People began to gather their things and head for the guest house.

'You did a wonderful job with the wedding arrangements, Callie.' Gideon's words were determinedly focused away from the two of them.

That was wise.

So why did Callie feel almost disappointed?

He went on. 'I'm glad it's over, and that it was kept quiet. Maybe if the family all leave, and Mary's happy and she and Mac keep a low profile, you'll be fine to carry on here.'

He was still worrying about her. Callie didn't want to think she glowed as a result of his words, but she probably did exactly that. Because Gideon cared.

Oh, she was far too soft when it came to him!

The last person finally left the gazebo. Callie let out a sigh of relief.

'It all went without a hitch. No doubt the storm that was predicted will have passed over us by morning, too. Mary and Mac are away for their honeymoon, and tomorrow everyone will make their way back to the mainland.'

'You'll be able to get back to normal.'

Did he sound as unenthusiastic at the thought of that as Callie felt?

She spoke into the silence—but not the words that were inside her head: I wish you didn't have to go.

'I'd better get back to the guest house—see if anyone needs anything. The clearing up in here can wait until tomorrow. I'll just shut the door on all of it for now.'

'Take a walk on the beach with me first. Give yourself a minute to wind down. You've worked hard today.'

Gideon rested a hand on her arm, and in the moment she hesitated, uncertain what to say or how to refuse what sounded like a dangerous but alluringly tension-easing idea, he pulled her the rest of the way through the doorway and closed it at their backs.

Somehow, minutes later, they were on the beach. Her strappy sandals were in her hand, his shoes and socks were in his, and the moon was above them, casting a silken glow over the sea and the island and the night.

'Are there jellyfish to avoid?' Gideon gripped her free hand, as though he would protect her from such things if need be.

Callie let him hold her hand, and her heart pounded just because he'd done the protective thing. 'There are no jellyfish. They don't end up here, which is good.'

So that meant he could let go of her, right? She could make her own way, breathe in the sea air, centre herself after this long, busy day, and then retire to the guest house and sleep, and be ready for an early start tomorrow.

Callie didn't shift her hand.

'All the guests are leaving first thing in the morning.' The words were almost plaintive. She cleared her throat. 'I hope Mary and Mac have a wonderful honeymoon. It's their first step in a whole new future.'

'I hope they're happy, Callie.' He stopped walking. 'I do hope that. When I discovered Mac's identity I was worried. I still am. The report I got in wasn't entirely reassuring. Mac himself seems to truly have changed his outlook, to be determined to live a crime-free life, but that doesn't erase his past…'

'I know.' How could she blame him for caring when that worry came out of his concern for his aunt? When Callie herself shared much of it? 'I don't blame you, Gid. To be honest, I'll feel a little better when his family are all gone. They're a little overwhelming all at once.'

'You're the only person in my life who calls me that—Gid. The only one who ever has.' That husky tone was back in his voice again, and he turned his head to look at her in the moon-limned night. 'I think it's just as well I'll be leaving in the morning, Callandra, because I'm having trouble viewing you the way I should.'

Don't ask him. 'What way are you viewing me?'

'In this way.' He lifted his hand to stroke his fingers over her shoulders. 'In a way that can't stop me looking at the soft dusting of freckles across your shoulders and wanting to kiss each one.'

'You—ah—' She closed her eyes as his fingers rose to caress her cheek. 'You make freckles sound enticing. I've always viewed them as a nuisance…'

'Enticing, tempting. As tempting as this.' His fingers drifted into her hair, pulled at pins, dropped those pins onto the sand at their feet as her hair tumbled down around her shoulders. 'God, Callie. I've never seen anything as beautiful as your hair. Why do you tie it back all the time?'

Before she could answer he shook his he
ad. 'I'm glad you tie it back. At least no one else is seeing…'

If he'd imbibed too much champagne she would have thought that was behind this loosening of his tongue—this spill of words that whispered into the night air and echoed on the roll of the waves, wending their way through her until she stood frozen, unable to resist them.

Callie couldn't remember any more why she needed to resist. Something about Gideon's negative attitude to emotional commitment, his rejection of her offer of her love seven years ago…

What was she saying? She'd had a crush on him. It hadn't been anything more than that. She certainly didn't have any deep feelings towards him now.

Yet the feelings are quite familiar, aren't they, Callie? Such longing for his arms around you, for him to hold you and do it as though he means it.

‘What are we doing, Gid? Why are you doing this?’ The words burst from her. ‘This wedding, watching Mac and Mary bind themselves together, all I could think of was when you married Dianna and I didn’t want to think about you that day. You don’t want—’

‘I want. I…I can’t help wanting.’

His mouth stopped her words, sealed to her lips, and his hands folded her in until the two of them were pressed close from chest to knee.

There was rawness in Callie’s heart and in Gideon’s hold—in the way his mouth moved over hers. Rawness, and a need that matched the feeling deep down inside her. And she finally acknowledged that feeling, even if it didn’t have a name.

Maybe its name was simply Gideon.

And though she shouldn’t think it if she wanted to protect herself—protect whatever corner of her did care about him because, yes, there was a corner of her that did—the thoughts came.

Why shouldn’t this go wherever it wanted to go? Why shouldn’t she let herself have whatever he wanted to share with her?

Callie had known Gideon for ever. She’d come close to making love with him once. If she wanted to have that intimacy with him now, why shouldn’t she?

A thousand reasons, her mind tried to tell her. But she couldn’t hear the words. She could only feel.

The hard muscle beneath his shirt. The contours of his shoulders. The breadth of his back and the male slimness of his waist. Callie closed her eyes and let her hands relearn those parts of him. Let her hands have something they had wanted for years.

She had cared for Gideon, wanted him and, yes, needed him, even. And now she made herself admit that not all of those feelings had gone away. She had thought she’d completely let go of them, of him, but her need for his touch, his arms around her, told her she hadn’t.

Oh, God. Had she merely locked him away inside herself and not dealt with it at all?

But she didn’t love him. She’d only thought she did. At that age she couldn’t have known her heart anyway.

‘What are you thinking, Callie?’

He kissed the tip of her nose. She could have taken it as the kind of comfort a man would offer a child. But it wasn’t. The way his arms held her told her that. The deep cadence of his voice as he spoke her name told her that.

‘I guess it’s this.’ She searched his eyes in the moonlight and her hands came up to grip his forearms. His hands clasped her waist. ‘But I don’t know what to do about this.’

His fingers tightened for a moment against her waist. ‘I know what I want…’

She knew what she wanted, too. And that scared her—because she wanted him too much, and she wanted him with parts of her that had cared too much seven years ago.

'I have to go in, Gideon. I can't—I can't do this with you. It's not a good idea for either of us. It just…complicates things. You don't want me this way—not really. And I don't want the…the stress.'

How she managed to deny herself she didn't know, but she got the words out and walked away without waiting for an answer. There was only one answer anyway, and Gideon gave it to her in his silence, in the way he remained right there on the beach as she walked away.

Callie tipped her face up and told herself this was brave of her, and smart and sensible and practical. He would go in the morning. She would stay here and get on with her work. All would be well.

It would.

Wouldn't it?

CHAPTER SIX

ALL being well didn't exactly happen.

At four a.m., the man who handled transport to and from the island had to start boating people away. Gideon called in his skipper as well, but it still took time to get everyone gone.

'You're fully confident it's safe to make this final trip now?' Callie posed the question to her regular boat skipper.

'It's safe, but I do want to get moving. I hope that third boat's skipper knew what he was doing, heading to the other side of the island the way he did. I'll radio in on him once I'm away. Don't know what he was doing, anyway. There's no one over that side. Illegal fishing, maybe? I'll see if anyone knows…' With this resolved in his mind, he went on with more urgent concerns. 'This storm—' Her skipper shook his head, glanced at the sky. 'If anything, the weather warning has failed to register the depth of this one. It's going to get the island square-on, and it's going to hit soon.'

Callie swallowed hard—because she knew she could trust the skipper's prediction. He'd spent enough time in this area to know what he was talking about.

'Go safely.'

If illegal fishing was going on it would have to be reported, but now wasn't the time for her to worry about that. Callie stepped back and the two men boarded their crafts. Finally everyone was gone. Everyone but her and Gideon.

He refused to leave.

'If it's safe for you to stay, to use the storm cellar until this is over, then it's safe for me to stay with you. Either you come away with me or we both stay. I won't leave you here alone.'

'All right.' She pushed her hand through her hair. There hadn't even been time to draw it back in its

usual ponytail after the couple of hours she'd slept before she'd got the emergency call to start evacuating the island. 'But you should have gone with them, Gideon—though I do appreciate your company.'

'Have you been through anything like this before?' He ignored her comment and glanced at the roughening sky.

'I haven't, but I know what has to be done. Storm shutters have to be closed over all the guest house windows, and mattresses need to be put against those windows from the inside. And all the other usual things.' There was so much else that needed doing. Cleaning out the gazebo, taking down the fairy lights…She didn't know if there would be time to do any of those things.

'Then let's move. From what the authorities have said we have two hours, tops, before this thing hits. Less if your skipper's predictions are accurate.'

His hair was uncombed, and he had beard shadow on his jaw and a determined gleam in his eyes, and Callie felt…

Safe. She felt safe in the face of the storm that was about to break over her little island, doing its best to wipe everything on it into the sea.

The guest house would stand. Well, she hoped and prayed it would. Mary had experienced two storms of this predicted severity in her time here, and both times the guest house had weathered the storm quite well.

But nothing like it had happened during Callie's tenure as manager. And Mary had had to rebuild the gazebo once…

'I'm glad Mary and Mac left before this came along. Knowing your aunt, she would have wanted to skip the honeymoon and stay.'

They took care of the guest house, but did only a little work in the gazebo because they didn't get their two hours. In less than that time the wind was roaring.

They'd carried the last of the supplies into the underground storm cellar, and only just managed, between the two of them, to get the door closed and barred behind them.

Gideon leaned his weight against it while Callie slid the bolts home. She had to lean in close to him to do it. Close enough to feel his body warmth. Her gaze lifted to his, locked, and she became instantly aware of the intimacy of their situation.

Two people locked in a cosy storm shelter until further notice. 'I'm…ah…I'm glad we got the breakables out of the gazebo.'

Callie stepped away from him, rubbed her hands down the sides of her jeans and tried not to think about the roaring of the wind outside or the roaring of her awareness of Gideon. Maybe fear of the elements was raising her consciousness of him.

She glanced at the overhead light in the cellar's main room and wondered how long the electricity would hold up.

‘I wish we could have cleared the gazebo out completely.’

‘We did what we could in the time frame.’

God, his voice was so deep.

Callie drew a shaken breath and reached for one of the baskets of leftovers they’d brought with them. He wouldn’t see how her hand shook, would he?

Gideon lifted the other basket and carried it to the small kitchenette. His back muscles flexed through his cotton shirt as he moved.

Callie had pressed her hands to those muscles in the abandoned cottage during the rain. Had that only been two days ago?

He turned to face her. ‘Try not to worry about what will happen next. The storm is out of our control until it’s over now.’

Yes, it was—and Callie felt a little out of control, too. ‘I don’t think I like not being able to have my eye on what’s happening on the other side of that door.’ She might be safer on that side—away from the temptation within!

‘I feel the same, but we’ll be fine.’ He half reached for her hand before he turned away, opened the basket and began to draw items out of it. ‘Let’s get these things into the fridge.’

Wedding food. Rich, luscious desserts, delicious pastries, and several kinds of meat and vegetables in tangy sauces. A feast for the senses.

Not a good way to think of it, Callie, given your senses appear to be overloaded with Gideon-consciousness as it is.

Callie forced a smile. ‘At least we won’t starve.’

She glanced at their surroundings. Felt rattled by that ro
ar outside again. It was getting louder, rougher. Callie forced herself to think about their comfort down here. Bathroom and basic kitchen facilities, living area. All good.

‘There’s a bedroom with a bed in it,’ she blurted—and could have winced. She rushed on to explain. ‘It’s a king-sized bed, so that will be fine if we need to…to sleep. There’ll be tons of room.’

She was overstating the case, wasn’t she? She clamped her lips shut so nothing else would blurt out.

But Gideon didn’t laugh, or even smile at her verbal spill. Instead his gaze locked onto her, and his body stilled close to hers, and somehow she knew he was thinking of kissing her, of holding her.

‘Callandra—’

‘Movies.’ She rushed the word out with a hint of poorly disguised desperation. ‘We can watch movies for as long as the electricity holds out. There’s a TV and DVD-player, and I know Mary left some movies

down here.'

They could watch movies, and that would stop her from thinking thoughts she should not think. Such as that she had never found a man to match up to Gideon…

One very short moment passed before he nodded. 'Movies are a good idea.'

Yes. Good. They both agreed.

When she didn't immediately move, he led the way to a cabinet in the corner and gestured to the selection of titles. 'Pick whatever you want to see.'

Callie chose two she hadn't watched before. One comedy, one drama. Those would be quite safe, wouldn't they? They watched the drama first. Who knew it would be a sensual drama? That just made things even worse. It even made her stop noticing most of the storm noise outside. Well, other than the crashing and banging and smashing…

When the movie ended she bolted to her feet. Anything to get off the sofa and away from the temptation to lean into Gideon's body, to snuggle up and enjoy all the warmth of him in all sorts of ways she shouldn't be thinking about when there was a storm raging outside that might well be destroying her source of income.

'I'll make hot drinks. Would you like tea or coffee? There'll be instant and teabags, at least.'

'Tea is fine.' He also stood, pushed his hands into his pockets. He had on a pair of tan trousers and a navy shirt loose over them. He scrubbed his hand over his jaw.

As he did so, something smashed against the outer door.

Callie squealed. Just slightly. Purely because that one had surprised her. 'Ah—that's really getting going now.' She blew out a breath and told herself to get a grip.

'It's all right.'

He wrapped her in his arms. Just drew her in and cuddled her. And it should only have been for comfort, but the moment his arms closed around her their gazes met, and then it wasn't only comfort being given and received.

His hands rubbed against her back, and his eyes warmed with delicious interest and an edge of the need that Callie felt inside herself.

She curled her hand around the back of his neck. Only that. It was all that was needed. He dipped his head, gave her what she had silently asked for: his mouth close to hers, then pressed to hers.

They kissed in counterpoint to the raging of the storm. Soft, soothing, slow kisses that eased one into the other in a lovely, mellow cadence.

The whistle of the kettle broke them apart, but Gideon's arms remained loosely around her.

'Leave it. Let it shut off.'

Oh, she wanted to do that—wanted the promise inherent in that suggestion.

'We—ah—I'm not sure if we should skip having tea.'

Callie wasn't sure if she was capable of making tea right now!

Gideon made it for them, and carried it back to the sofa for the second movie—but she couldn't have said what it was about.

Her shoulder was pressed to his. When they'd finished their drinks he played with her fingers. It was almost unconscious, so how could she be so conscious of such a simple touch?

'It's not simple, though, is it?'

His words made her realise she'd spoken her thought aloud. And he turned her into his arms and kissed her again. And they watched and kissed and cuddled their way through every movie Mary had brought down until it was finally nightfall. By then Callie's senses were so overwhelmed she didn't know where she began and ended any more.

But she couldn't regret what they'd done. She needed to give herself this time with Gideon.

'I must be insane, but I just…just can't stop touching you.' Gideon's eyes were ringed with the blurry edge of desire, and that was there for her, and it was beautiful. God, so beautiful.

Callie raised her mouth so he would kiss her again. It had to happen. It was that simple and that complicated.

The electricity cut out ten minutes after the final movie had ended. Callie only noticed because the blue screen on the TV ceased to cast its light over the planes of Gideon's face, which was angled to hers as he kissed her.

She'd lit a candle late in the day, in anticipation of this happening, so they weren't plunged into utter darkness.

'You're beautiful in this light.' His words were gravel, and they shivered over her senses like a touch. 'The candlelight makes your hair gleam.'

Her heart beat so fast and thunderously in her chest she wondered if he could see its movement.

Gideon. He'd filled a young girl's world and her dreams, and now they were here, and Callie's resistance was gone. Just gone.

He couldn't fill her world now because that would mean she had a deep emotional attachment to him—and she wasn't prepared to have that. It would be stupid to have that. But, oh, she needed him so, and she understood now that she had to give herself to him, have him give himself to her.

Once. So she could have her answers and lay this to rest. She needed to have him. And she needed to do that accepting that he was not a man who could or ever would love her deeply. Callie needed to take what she wanted with him this once, here and now. It would be her goodbye, of sorts, so she could move

on, resolved, and be free, finally, of any lingering feelings for him.

The thought saddened her, but it was also as necessary as her next breath.

'I should get the generator online.' His hands caressed her shoulders. 'I don't want to leave you.'

'We can do it together.' Callie stood on legs that felt like rubber.

Somehow they took care of that, and then she was babbling again—on about the storm and the weather and what they might find tomorrow—until Gideon laid a finger over her lips, and then she knew that there would be no staving this off. She didn't want to, anyway.

'I thought I was doing the right thing for you, Callie. When I sent you to Mary.'

It was the last thing she had expected, and it came from him with both tenderness and a self-doubt she imagined must be rare as his hands shaped her shoulders and his gaze searched hers.

She drew a shaky breath. 'I know, Gid. It was the best thing for me. I needed to grow up.'

'And have you?'

Callie knew what his question meant, and the answer was inside her—fully formed and ready. 'Yes. Yes, Gideon. I've grown up.'

Enough to take this night with him, this time out of time, and let it be all to her that it could be.

Tomorrow he would go. That, too, was understood. That was what she needed.

Gideon sighed into her hair, pressed a kiss against the crown of it. 'I want to kiss you now, Callie. Kiss you and not only kiss you. I…I don't want to stop.'

'I want that, too.' Oh, she did.

Callie met him halfway. Maybe a little more than halfway. And Gideon quickly took her past that point.

'God, Callie. Nothing tastes the way you do.' He sank his fingers into her hair and angled her head for better access, to deepen the kiss until their tongues tangled and every part of her was held flush against the strength of him.

The tips of his fingers brushed the nape of her neck, where the sensitive cords that felt filled with a thousand nerve
-endings were all attuned to him. Callie stroked her hands up over his chest and across his shoulders, and simply held onto all that strength and focus.

And inside herself she thought, This time we finish this.

She had Gideon in her arms, the way she had wanted for so long.

And of course she knew what she was doing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'CALLIE. I need—' Gideon didn't know how to express what he needed.

To make love to her. To hold her. He needed Callie in ways he didn't want to think about, because they came from a place inside him that he didn't understand, didn't trust. A place he hadn't realised still had its grip on her somehow even when he hadn't been with her.

A place that dictated things to him like, Look after Callie. Make sure Callie stays safe. Give her the chance to grow up, become who she needs to become.

And it also dictated, Don't let yourself become too attached to her, because the potential is there for a great deal of hurt if you do that.

Hurt for her, because he didn't know how to care the right way for a woman who needed more from him than desire and affection.

But…hurt for him? Had he been protecting himself by staying away from her?

What odd thought was that?

Callie made a soft, needy sound and stretched up to wrap her arms around his shoulders. Her fingers dug into his back and his arms came around her tightly. There were emotions inside him that he didn't want to confront or think about, and he wasn't sure he would understand if he did but the thoughts washed through him anyway.

She is mine.

I'm going to have her.

He'd come here to make sure her future was secure. If need be, he would have rescued her. Now he forced himself to admit he'd also come here to finally give himself sight of her again.

Seven years ago they'd been on the brink of this. The barriers had been her age, his commitment to Dianna, and Callie's heart on her sleeve and his entrenched belief somewhere inside himself that he was unable to feel that way towards a woman.

But now he could hold Callie and give her everything he had inside himself. And provided she understood what was being offered…

Gideon looked into green eyes shining for him. He ran his hands the length of her arms, down over her elbows, and drew her hands into his own. He made himself warn her, so she could end this now if that was what she needed.

'You know where this is headed, Callie?'

'I know.' Her lips softened on the acknowledgement. 'I know where it's headed, and I know what it will be and what it won't be. Just this. You and me exploring this, once, so we know—so we can put our past to rest and go on in our futures with all questions answered. For those reasons, I want it—'

Want was the right word for her to use. Want was the word he needed to hear from her—the only word he could give her in return. She'd made a sensible case of it—put it into words as well as he possibly could

have done.

So why did it leave an ache inside him as though it wasn't what he needed to hear?

Gideon pushed the question aside and looked down into Callie's eyes.

She squeezed his hands, and the sparkle in those green depths softened to sweet acceptance and desire as she read his acceptance and desire.

'Come to bed, Gideon.'

Gideon took Callie to bed. In one small part of herself Callie noticed the silence outside, knew she should be worrying about the damage out there, but all she could hear was the beat of her blood in her veins, all she could think about was her sweet need for the man who held her in his arms.

'Let me see your beautiful body.' Gideon drew the soft T-shirt over her head and tossed it aside, caught his breath as his gaze took in what he had revealed. 'All the way to your navel…'

His fingers, the palms of his hands, tracked over her breastbone, down across the cleft between the swell of her breasts in the lacy bra. Lower.

'Freckles? You're talking about my freckles?' Her words were choppy, breathless. Her hands were at his shirt, fumbling with buttons until Gideon's eyes blazed.

When the shirt was gone, he gripped her hands in his and brought them up. As she touched his chest it expanded on one big, long inhalation.

'Yes, I'm talking about your freckles. I wondered…' His words trailed off and he gave his attention to exploring instead.

Her bra disappeared in a soft rustle, and gentle hands worshipped her while those deep blue eyes held her gaze.

'Actually, they go…' She lost her focus as he unbuttoned her jeans, pushed the zipper down and drew them slowly, slowly down her thighs. His hands followed.

'Yes. They go…' His finger grazed the top of her panties and he growled low in the back of his throat. 'Callie, you're so beautiful. If I'd seen you then—'

That, too, was clamped back. But she didn't mind because she could see the rest of his statement in the eyes that burned for her.

If they'd gone that little bit further than they actually had seven years ago this would have happened then. And she knew now that she wouldn't have been ready. No matter what she might have thought or believed back then, she would not have been ready for the intensity of being with Gideon this way at that age.

Maybe you should listen to that warning, Callie. Because how can you be so sure you're ready even now?

Maybe she wasn't. The ache inside her chest told her she wasn't. But there was no going back now. No matter how she felt when this ended, Callie didn't want to—could not—go back.

Resolve it. She had to resolve it. And yet her emotions were not feeling closer to being resolved. Even so, the words poured out. 'I want this moment with you, Gid. Everything we can have in it.' And at least she managed to add, with barely a quiver to her voice at all, 'And no worries about tomorrow.'

Whether she could believe them herself or not, her words should have reassured him. She'd thought they would. Maybe the clouding of his gaze was in her imagination…

A moment later he blinked away whatever had been there. He kissed her long and deep, and his hands caressed her until all their clothes were gone and it was just Callie and Gideon on a bed in a room, loving each other, gazes locked. And whatever was there, was there.

His mouth stole sweet kisses from her lips as he loved her over and over, brought her gently and inexorably to climax. His eyes filled with need and affection for her as he also reached his fulfilment.

And Callie realised in that moment when Gideon found his release, and she found her own release, that she loved him. Really loved him. That her whole heart and all of what was inside her loved Gideon Deveraux. Not with the childish love of an eighteen-year-old, untried and uncertain of her ground, but with a mature love that sliced right through all her objections and concerns and simply yielded to what, to her heart, appeared to be completely inevitable.

She was deeply in love with Gideon. Oh, why hadn't she seen that coming in the way she'd felt when he'd called her name on the island two days ago? Why hadn't she understood it when it had felt so right to be kissed by him in the abandoned cottage, and again, last night on the beach?

If she'd understood, maybe she could have protected herself.

And maybe you couldn't have done a thing. You love him. You loved him seven years ago. That love stayed with you and grew up with you. How could you have hoped to stop yourself from feeling that way?

'Callie?' Gideon's hands rubbed up and down over her arms. 'Are you all right? I wasn't…I'm not usually…I don't—' He broke off, didn't seem to know how to articulate his thoughts.

That made two of them, because Callie didn't know what to say either. She had to take a great deal of care not to blurt out what was inside her. Those feelings were too intense, too strong. If she gave them to him he wouldn't be able to receive them. She had to find a way to make them go away.

Because this hadn't been about that. This had been about resolving, not beginning. About closing, not opening.

Callie shook her head and smiled as best she could through the knot of emotion and uncertainty and deep internal fear of what she had unleashed and now didn't know how to leash again.

'I'm fine. I hope you're not going to ask me to regret what just happened, though, because I won't do that.'

Later, by herself, when she faced all that this had brought about in her, then, maybe she would have to regret it. If she could bring herself to do so.

'How did you—?' He closed his eyes in a long, slow blink. When they opened again, his hands were closed around the balls of her shoulders in a tender grip. 'Come closer, Callie. Cuddle with me a while. I…I need to hold you.'

Those words, that need, cut through her defences as nothing else could have. And for now at least Callie had lost any ability to distance herself, to start rebuilding her walls or shoring up her defences.

She had burrowed deep into his arms before she'd realised she'd moved. He wrapped those strong arms hard around her, stroked his fingers through the tangle of her hair, and a deep sigh came from his chest.

Gideon made love to Callie twice more before they finally slept. Slow, gentle loving that seemed right for her and felt right to him. He didn't know why he needed that with her. He simply sensed it was something he must take care to give her.

They drifted into sleep in each other's arms and he felt…blessed. And more content and happy than he

could remember feeling. He had never felt that way with Dianna.

All Gideon knew was that his arms didn't want to unlock from around her. That it wasn't a case of being so content he didn't want to let go. He couldn't make himself let go. Possessiveness, yes, there was that inside him—a great deal more of it than he had any right to feel. Caveman instincts, maybe? He'd claimed her. He wanted the world to know she was his and he was…keeping her.

But that was the thing.

He wasn't keeping her.

They had this night and nothing more. Callie herself had made it clear that was all she expected or wanted. She'd made it clear this wasn't about her heart.

She'd made it clear this had
been a goodbye for her, a way of moving on, to lay the past to rest, their questions to rest, and go forward. Maybe into a relationship with a great guy who would be everything she needed.

A chill started somewhere deep in Gideon. He drew the comforter over them and hugged Callie closer. He drifted to sleep with a thousand questions and no answers twisting through his insides, playing through the recesses of his mind.

When Gideon woke, it was to shards of sunlight streaming into the room, emptiness beside him, and none of his questions resolved. His arms felt too light, as though they weren't right because there wasn't the weight of Callie within them.

Instinct drove him out of the bed—drove him to search her out and not waste time doing it. He didn't know what he would say when he found her, only that he had to find her.

But he forced himself to take a quick shower, and then he yielded—to the instinct he understood, and the one he didn't. He sought Callie out. He wished she had stayed all night in the haven of his arms.

What kind of haven are you to her, Deveraux? You have nothing to offer her that she would need.

He didn't. Couldn't.

Could he?

No. Last night the feelings that had washed through him as he'd held her in his arms must have simply been some random kind of overload. Maybe because he'd known her so long and they had almost made love once before.

Well, he had to see Callie now. Talk to her. To say…Gideon didn't know what.

He slung a shirt over his trousers and made his way outside still buttoning it, because there was this sense of urgency that he couldn't explain, could only act on.

'The guest house survived with nothing worse than a couple of broken windows and some rain damage through the breaks. The gazebo is wrecked, but it's insured.'

Callie was in the garden. The area was flattened—covered in debris. She was dragging branches into a pile and focusing on it very thoroughly, so she didn't have to focus on him.

'I'll get an assessor here as quickly as I can to deal with that.'

'Those are too heavy for you.' He stepped towards her. Wanted to take her in his arms, hold her, kiss her, take her back to bed or at least for starters tell her that one night together couldn't possibly be enough.

And where had that thought come from? More importantly, where did he go with it? They had agreed on one encounter, and even that had perhaps not been a particularly smart idea.

He shouldn't want more. Yet he did.

Gideon reached out to help her with her burden. 'Let me—'

A crack sounded overhead and Callie gasped and leapt forward, shoved at him. And because it was so unexpected she actually managed to push him several feet. Her momentum sent her back with him.

The tree limb that smashed to the ground behind them was twice the thickness of a human torso and about twelve feet in length.

She turned her head from the sight and her arms clamped around Gideon's middle. His arms came around her while they both drew a collective breath.

'You could have been killed—'

'You just saved my life—'

They both stopped, and Callie truly realised the grip she had on him. A wash of memories from last night poured through her, and she dropped her arms and almost stumbled back as she put distance between them.

Because that distance had to be there. She had to protect herself—her feelings. She'd decided that when she'd woken cuddled in his arms, when her heart had been first-thing-in-the-morning vulnerable and she'd wanted so much for him to love her and want her as she loved and wanted him.

Because she did.

Making love with him had only confirmed that fact for her, even though it was completely wrong and totally unhelpful to feel that way.

So Callie had got up. She'd told herself she had to toughen up. As much as she could. To save herself. She had to let him go graciously or, at worst, without him seeing her feelings for him.

'Callie—?' Gideon's voice was deep, his gaze on her intent.

She wanted to read so much into his expression, but she couldn't go there. Not when she knew she loved him, and knew equally that he didn't share those feelings towards her. She'd looked into his eyes last night and wanted to see all sorts of things, but affection was exactly that—nothing more. Callie steeled her expression to guard her thoughts.

Gideon searched Callie's face, watched the emotions chase each other across her features until she became quite guarded.

His chest ached as he acknowledged he was the reason for that guardedness. 'I shouldn't have made love—'

'I did just save your life.' Callie said it with a determination that seemed to come from deep inside her, as though she couldn't bear to hear what he had been about to say.

'Yes, you did save my life.' He hadn't been conscious of their surroundings, only of her. Now he realised that for him they had made love last night—not simply gone to bed together. His emotions—well, he wasn't sure what had happened there. He knew only that protectiveness had once again risen in him as he thought how close Callie had just come to being harmed. 'You put yourself in the path of danger in the process.'

‘I acted on instinct.’ Her face firmed into some kind of resolution. ‘Just as you must have the day you saved my uncle, when that tractor rolled and you leapt in to get him free so it didn’t roll on him.’

That was true, he supposed. But…‘I don’t see the significance. I simply did what I had to do.’

‘You saved his life.’ Callie shrugged her shoulders. ‘Well, I just saved yours. By Reid’s code, that means we’re even. You’re free of any lingering sense of responsibility you might have felt for me. I’m setting you free, Gideon. We can end the chapter now. It’s—we can be finished now.’

She was releasing him. Not only from that old feeling of obligation, but totally setting him free.

So she could move on?

Gideon’s chest felt odd, and he suddenly wasn’t at all sure he wanted to be released. ‘Callie—?’

The phone in his pocket rang and he drew it out to shut it off. Later. The world could intrude later. Right now he needed to get to the bottom of this with Callie.

‘It’s Mary,’ he murmured, and reached to silence the ring tone.

‘She’s probably heard about the storm. She’ll be worried about the state of things here—and about me, I guess.’ Callie waited expectantly for him to answer the call.

Gideon gave in to the inevitable. ‘Deveraux.’

In fact it wasn’t Mary on the phone but MacKay Jones, and the news he had to impart was serious enough and concerning enough that Gideon had Callie’s arm in his grip and was moving her towards the guest house’s storm shelter before the call had ended.

He barked questions into the phone, his gaze shifting left and right as he moved them, and he had Callie at the entry door to the storm cellar by the time he finally closed the phone with a snap and met her gaze.

‘Inside, Callie. I’m going to get some more food and rejoin you. Lock the door until I get back, and don’t open it without hearing my voice.’

Three minutes later he closed himself inside the shelter with her, drew her away from the door area and into the kitchen, put the supplies into the fridge and met her gaze.

‘That’s only in case we’re here a long time. I doubt that will be the case. You understood most of that conversation I had with MacKay Jones?’

‘Someone took photos of the wedding and leaked them to the press, and that’s led to this man phoning Mac and making a threat against my life.’ Callie’s mouth pinched tight. ‘Who is it and what kind of—?’

‘It’s one man with a vendetta against the Joneses.’ Gideon explained what MacKay had told him. Andrew had made an enemy during his incarceration—an unstable man the police had been trying to track down for months now, for a list of recent crimes that would put him away for the rest of his life if they caught him. ‘Although the
media coverage of the wedding was respectful and positive. That’s one good thing to have come out of this.’

‘But the bad thing is this man is coming to the island?’ Callie suppressed a shiver.

‘Yes, but the authorities are also on their way. It’s proof of his instability that he phoned MacKay to state his intentions. Maybe a part of him is ready to be caught.’ Gideon closed his hands over her arms. ‘You’re safe here. All you need to do is stay here—wait it out.’

‘With you. I’m staying here with you.’ Callie sought his eyes with hers and her worried green gaze clung to them. ‘You mustn’t go out there or get involved. What I don’t understand is who leaked the photos in the first place. There’s no way any of Mac’s family would have done it. And we took such care.’

Gideon lowered his hand until his fingers were wrapped around her wrist. ‘I may know. I have my suspicions, anyway.’

Her brows drew down. ‘Who?’

‘Heather Stiller. She was angry at having her opportunity here taken away. I didn’t like the look in her eyes at the time, but I was distracted. I didn’t think about it as much as I should have, and I didn’t reassure her very well either.’

‘I didn’t actually see her leave.’ Callie drew a sharp breath. ‘Did you?’

He shook his head. ‘She could have stayed back, or even made her way to the guest house to discuss the matter more—caught sight of Mac Kay, or other family members, recognised them, and realised she had a chance to be a bit spiteful by getting their photos to the press.’

‘That bounced back on her, then, if the coverage was positive.’

‘If it was her, she won’t be employed by any of my companies again after this.’ His thumb stroked over the skin of her inner wrist.

‘First the storm threat, and now this.’ Callie turned her head and soft curls brushed his face and neck.

Gideon wanted to take her in his arms and bury his face and hands in that riot of colour, inhale the scent of her as he remembered…

No. No remembering. No thinking about something that had happened that shouldn’t ever have happened. No longing to go there again.

‘What do we do, Gideon?’ Her question came from deep down, and it was maybe about more than the threat to her life.

‘We wait until I’m sure you’re safe.’ Something inside Gideon’s chest softened, tightened. ‘Then I want you to come back to Melbourne with me. I’ll get you a management job in one of my hotels there, where it’s not isolated.’

‘I can’t do that. It’s kind of you, but I already have a job, Gid. I don’t belong with you. I belong here.’

There were barriers in her face and in her eyes. Barriers she’d put up to protect herself—not from this worrying situation, but from him.

Gideon wanted to take those barriers down and get to the woman behind them. He wanted to kiss her senseless and make love to her until everything melted away. Everything except the two of them. He wanted to insist she let him keep her safe. He thought maybe he wanted her to let him in, and how could he want that?

‘Callie—’

‘We should settle in, if this is going to take a while.’ She gestured towards the living area.

So practical. So determined not to show her fear or, in this moment at least, her emotions.

Does that remind you of anyone else you know, Deveraux?

But in his case he didn't have the depth of emotion to bring to her in the first place.

No? And yet the protective instincts he battled right now seemed to suggest otherwise. He'd always had those feelings for Callie. Today she'd set him free from them, said the debt was paid, but it wasn't like that. He needed to keep her safe—for himself. For what it did for him.

Gideon tried to understand what that meant.

A shout sounded outside.

Moments later his mobile phone rang. Gideon released Callie reluctantly and answered the call. It was a short discussion, but he gave a nod of satisfaction when it ended.

'They got him, Callie. Mission accomplished. A task force is sweeping the island now, to make sure he had no accomplices, but we'll be able to leave here soon, and then we'll talk with them about what happens next. I'm still favouring taking you back to Melbourne.'

Callie wanted to argue, but other things took over. The meeting with the special task force, and phone calls with Mac and Mary, who were relieved but shaken, and determined to get back so they could check on Callie in person.

'We're organising flights to Melbourne now, Callie. We'll boat out to the island straight away from there.'

Mary's voice had been so worried that Callie had compromised, and agreed to go to Melbourne with Gideon.

For now—just to check in with Mary and Mac.

Once they were packed and on Gideon's small boat—which was a state-of-the-art small boat, Callie noted, with a measure of seafaring appreciation—Gideon took her aside quietly and met her gaze with his own.

'I'm glad it's all over, Callie, but I will make sure you're completely safe before you come back to the island. Even if that means employing security personnel for a time.'

'Oh, I'm sure that won't be needed—' she began, but he waved a hand.

'Whatever's necessary to keep you safe, my dear.'

The endearment washed through her, and as the silence stretched his gaze became even more serious.

'I don't know what to say to you about last night, Callie.' His voice was low, tight. Regretful and concerned, and perhaps…confused? 'There are no words. I shouldn't have let it happen and yet I did, and I'm finding it hard to regret…'

'You can regret it if you want to.' Her chin came up and she met his gaze without flinching, made herself do it. 'I said last night I'm not prepared to regret what we shared. There was something between us that had been there for a long time, whether you want to admit that or not. As far as I'm concerned it's a braver move to address it, do something about it, than go on trying to deny or ignore it. So…I'm glad. I'm glad we visited that. It's not the end of the world. It's happened. We can put an end to all those questions now and go our separate ways. This doesn't have to be complicated.'

'Doesn't it?' Why couldn't he believe that?

‘Let’s just get to Melbourne, see Mary and reassure her.’ Callie turned her gaze to the land mass before them. ‘Doing that is what matters now.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘MARY—you shouldn’t have interrupted your honeymoon for this. I promise you I’m quite fine.’ Callie murmured the words, and a moment later she and Mary were hugging fiercely.

They were inside Gideon’s Melbourne penthouse apartment. Mary and Mac had spoken with the task force before making their way here.

‘I’m so glad you’re safe, Callie. If I’d known what might happen—’ Mary broke off on a sob.

‘It’s my fault. I should never have thought I could ignore my past.’ Mac stepped closer to rub Mary’s back with the flat of his hand.

Gideon overrode all of it. ‘The threat is completely taken care of. From all accounts this man was nothing more nor less than psychotic. Your brother did nothing to aggravate him, during his term of incarceration or afterwards. The police are glad to have apprehended him, and the matter is done with now.’ Gideon drew a breath. ‘Most of all, Callie’s safe. That’s all that matters.’

Mac and Mary accepted his reassurances. Eventually.

They all spent a little time together then, before the older couple made their way to the hotel they’d booked for the night, with Callie’s stern words no doubt ringing in their ears.

‘You’re to go back to your honeymoon in the morning!’

Gideon smiled at the thought as he watched Callie’s gaze rove his home. ‘What are you finding of interest, Callie?’

Callie’s gaze shifted to Gideon’s face and she gave a wry smile. ‘I’m just impressed. It’s a lovely apartment. Nicer even than the one you had on your family’s estate.’

And Callie admitted it really was. Striking. Beautiful. And a home. That showed in the scatter of Gideon’s things all over the place. Cufflinks tossed on the coffee table beside a pile of newspapers. Towers of hardback and paperback books.

‘I like the russet and cream colour scheme.’

He shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced at his home as though seeing it through new eyes. ‘I didn’t realise I’d matched the colours to your—’ He broke off. Shook his head.

And they were there again. That simply.

He drew a deep breath. ‘I’m glad you weren’t hurt today, Callie. I…I don’t think I could have borne that.’

For the first time she saw the depth of his care for her and, oh, her heart ached—because what if he could really, truly care, deep down inside, in a way that matched the way she felt about him? Care even beyond his need to keep her safe? That had no doubt started when he’d felt responsible for a young girl, but she was all grown-up now.

Callie wanted to hope—and that was a truly terrifying feeling, because all her life she had stopped herself from hoping, from letting herself need others in more than the barest minimum of ways.

Yes, she had loved Gideon for a long time, but even in that she had allowed him to push her away, send

her away. Deep inside she had known that by doing that she was protecting her heart.

She had to protect it now, too, because Gideon's feelings weren't the same as hers. His protectiveness was simply that.

'I need to go back. To the island. Go home.' That was what she needed to do. Go back, regroup, put these feelings behind her and hope they evaporated as time went on.

It didn't matter that they hadn't evaporated in seven years. Things had changed now. She had to move on now. Surely she could move on now? Callie prayed it would prove to be the case.

'You can go first thing tomorrow morning.' Gideon hesitated. 'Or stay longer—go shopping or something before you head back…'

'No. I'm fine. I need to get back.' She needed it for her sanity—and, indeed, wouldn't it be better to go right now? 'I could ca
ll Joe and ask—'

'Call him—but arrange it for morning.' Gideon's shoulders tightened beneath his shirt. 'I don't want you out at sea at night. Although at least they've contacted Heather Stiller, and we know her only interest in passing on those photos was spite.'

'I'm glad you gave her a second chance—positioned her into another job under a very watchful senior eye.' Callie rubbed between her brows, where the effects of a headache had begun to take hold. 'That was kind. From the sound of her, when you had her on speaker phone earlier, she truly appreciated the seriousness of what she'd done and regretted it. Almost capsizing in the storm in that boat she hired to get her off the island must have frightened her, too. Her time there can't have been pleasant.'

'She's fortunate she's not in a lot more trouble.' He watched the movement of Callie's fingers against her brow. 'Let me get you some paracetamol for that.' He rummaged in a high cupboard in his kitchen and came back to her with a glass of water and two white pills.

Callie took them with a grateful nod, and then wished she hadn't dipped her head quite so vigorously. 'Thanks. I guess I got a little more tense today than I realised.'

'You did really well, Callie.' He glanced away. 'Why don't you get in the hot tub for a while? Let the jets do their thing—get rid of the stress.'

'That sounds like heaven.' The only thing she could imagine that would be better would be to share the tub with him. Callie's face heated as her thoughts registered. 'A nice solitary soak in the tub,' she articulated with belated care, 'sounds nice.'

He took her elbow and guided her forward, down a hallway, until they stood outside a closed door. Gideon opened it and a bathroom was revealed. The tub was sunk into the floor—tiled and definitely beckoning.

Gideon flicked on the jets while she stood at the top of the room. 'There's a bathrobe on the back of the door. Take as long as you want, Callie.' He backed out of the bathroom. 'I'll order in some dinner.'

'Thanks. I think I will enjoy a good soak.'

Callie gave in to her need for the tub, stepped fully into the room and, the moment Gideon closed the door behind himself, started to peel off her clothes.

Callie came out of his bathroom smelling of bath crystals and warm woman. She must have piled her hair on her head before she climbed in the tub, because it was mostly dry, with wispy bits that curled around her neck in damp tendrils.

Gideon's hands flexed at his sides. For a moment he wasn't sure if he'd actually stepped forward to touch those tendrils or remained where he was. The slam of desire blindsided him, and when he came back to himself his gaze was locked on Callie's face and his heart was pounding with something that was desire and emotion mixed.

'I hope I wasn't too long in there.' Callie's glance went beyond him to the Italian food on the table. Risotto pollo, gourmet pizza made with mozzarella cheese and sundried tomato, fresh bread rolls with rich, creamy butter…

A smile broke across her face. 'You got Italian for dinner. I haven't had it for ages.'

'I remember you used to like it.' For long moments all he could do was stare at her, while everything inside him told him to keep her here, not to let her leave. Not in the morning, not at all.

This was what was behind his sense of emptiness when he'd woken this morning in the bed they'd shared and felt the coldness of her absence so keenly. He'd developed some kind of feelings for her. Feelings that were deeper than friendship, stronger than care for someone who'd been placed in his charge.

When Callie drew a breath her mouth trembled, and he knew she wasn't unaffected by whatever had leapt to life between them just now.

'Shall we eat here at the table?' Callie brushed her hands across the thighs of her jeans, tugged the cerise blouse into place.

Gideon watched those movements and remembered her legs wrapped around him, remembered kissing his way along rows of freckles…

'We'll eat in comfort.' He growled out the words and led her into the living room.

They ate their meal and talked about nothing. And the awareness between them was a roar in his ears until they'd eaten their fill and he turned to face her.

'There's still risotto left.' She gestured towards it.

'I'm not hungry…not for more of that.' He was hungry for Callie. 'I don't want "the end" yet, Callie.' He searched her face and didn't fully know his own thoughts. Only that he needed more of her. 'Stay with me longer. Don't go back in the morning.'

If she stayed, he would lose this feeling of dread and loss that threatened to lodge somewhere deep inside him and refuse to leave.

'I can't…' She tipped her head to the side, studied his face as though she might find insight there.

'You said we'd explored something and that was the end of it,' he said. He had thought so, too—until this morning. 'But it didn't feel like an ending to me. It didn't feel like it should be that.'

At Gideon's words Callie's heart did a slow roll in her chest. 'What—what are you saying?'

'We're good together. I'm saying…we're good together.' He rammed a hand through his hair, but he didn't take his gaze from her. 'One night—we could have more than that. Cuddling and companionship, friendship and togetherness. We could keep all that.'

Under the limits of his ability to embrace it.

Because this wasn't a declaration of love. At no time had he told her he loved her—the one vital ingredient any relationship between them could not do without. But that word was missing from Gideon's

vocabulary, and her feelings went deeper than the lack of that word.

The hope that had risen in her heart dissipated. ‘I can’t do what you’re asking of me.’ She turned her face away, forced her body to follow suit. ‘I—I have to go to bed. I’m tired. Please excuse me.’

She walked away before he could say anything. Retired to the guest room he’d allocated to her.

And she knew she would be gone long before he rose from his own bed in the morning.

Gone back to her home and her life. Because Callie did belong somewhere. She wasn’t all alone in the world.

She belonged on the island.

CHAPTER NINE

‘AND if we listen very carefully we may hear them digging down into the sand.’ Callie was on all fours, in jeans and bare feet and a thick fluffy jumper that had seen better days. The sand beneath her was damp and cold, the cave dark but for the light of the single torch in her hand.

Fifteen excited schoolgirls and one somewhat less excited supervising teacher crowded behind her as they made their way through the low, narrow passage that led out of the cave to the shore.

Most of her crab whispering tours fell substantially into the ‘great performance, not much reality’ bracket. But those who signed up for them never seemed to mind. And Callie did enjoy taking tour groups through the warren of caves, sighting the occasional crab there. No one needed to know that was because she fed them here regularly, as well as on the beach.

Yes, she enjoyed the tours, but for the past week she had struggled to find the enjoyment. It was hard to do that when she couldn’t seem to focus her thoughts away from Gideon. Thanks to him sending an expert team of workers, the island was almost restored to normal after the storm. Callie’s equilibrium was taking longer.

What if they could have been together, and he could have come to have deeper feelings for her? What if she’d cut and run without trying hard enough to see if that was an option? Maybe he’d have wanted to continue, and then he might have found those feelings inside him? Maybe he was capable of that…?

‘Crab whispering is a rare art form,’ Callie went on, while the conviction grew inside her that she should have done something more than back away. She should have fought for what she wanted and needed from him. ‘But these exoskeleton creatures can be whispered out if we take enough care.’

‘Is it much further until we get out?’ The teacher whispered the question.

‘Not far at all.’ Callie hoped her distraction hadn’t shown. She shone the torch around the cave and said in her best crab whisperer tone, ‘There’s one of our friendly creatures now.’

The crab received the gift of some of the special feed Callie had brought along. The girls giggled, as girls were wont to do. Lots of shushing followed, and then they were out on the beach. Callie shared the crab feed out, and stood back while her guests enjoyed the sight of dozens of crabs scuttling about in the moonlight on the beach.

Some of the girls started to giggle in earnest, then, and something changed in the atmosphere.

Callie followed the direction of their gazes and her heart stopped.

Gideon.

What was he doing here? And why did her heart have to melt with love for him? That wasn't fair. She felt the teacher's gaze on her, and with some part of her she heard the woman's words.

'Come along, girls. It was a wonderful tour, but I'm sure Miss Humbold would like an opportunity to…ah…to tidy up after the tour and…and so forth.'

Fifteen curious schoolgirls were hustled away.

A man and a woman were left facing each other across a stretch of beach.

Beyond Gideon, Callie could make out a small array of glass containers on the beach. But she only really had eyes for Gideon.

'Callie. I came because—'

'I'd decided to come to you. I'd just now decided—'

'I needed to see you.' His words came out in a low murmur. He gestured at the retreating figures of the schoolgirls and the teacher. 'I can see you're busy this weekend, but I'm hoping you can spare a few moments for me.' He hesitated, as though uncertain how to go on.

'I can spare the time.' What did he want to say? 'Why did you come, Gideon?'

It was a cry from deep inside her. Need and guardedness and a wish all rolled into one—because it appeared she couldn't stop herself from hoping after all. And where did that leave her, if she needed to protect her emotions as she had always protected them, even when she had let herself care about him?

Even when she had discovered that deep down she loved him, had fallen in love all the more with him later?

'You were crab whispering.' He said it with what she would have sworn was admiration. 'I could see how much the group enjoyed themselves.'

'Yes, I took them through the caves. It might sound like a silly concept, but the guests love it.' She forced herself to meet his gaze. 'I love it.' At least she did when she could concentrate on it. 'Why are you here, Gideon? I heard from Mary just today. We spoke on the phone, so I know there's nothing amiss there.'

'I've talked with her recently, too. Mary and Mac sound very happy.' Gideon took a step closer to her and cleared his throat. 'I was wrong to doubt Mac and Mary's love, Callie. It is enough to carry them through anything.'

He searched her eyes as he spoke these words.

Callie swallowed hard. 'I'm happy for Mary and Mac—'

'I am, too. But that's not what I want to talk about.' He threw out one hand, as though he didn't know how to go on. The struggle inside him was obvious, and she wanted to help him through it. She just didn't know how to do that.

I would love him through it.

I would love him through anything—just like Mary would love Mac through anything.

'Gideon…'

'Will you come for a walk on the beach with me, Callie?'

He reached out his hand and Callie placed her hand in his. Her heart hurt so much—but how could she do anything but go with him?

They walked until they came to all those glass containers. Here, the beach was sandy and flat. They stopped, and Gideon turned her to face him. He swallowed hard, and in the moonlight she thought she caught a nervous expression in his eyes.

A moment later she figured she must have imagined it because she wanted it to be there.

'You want to be released—you need better closure—maybe you don't want me working in your employ? I could find another job.'

Maybe if she said it for him they could get through this faster, and then she could get to the part where her heart started to heal and she got on with her life without thinking of him every moment of every day, longing for his arms around her every second of every endless night.

'No. You're perfect here.' He gripped her hands, closed his eyes and inhaled. 'That's not what I want from you, Callie. It's not why I'm here. I thought I'd be able to tell you—that it would be easy once I was face to face with you.' Gideon's hands squeezed hers and he seemed so intense.

'You're scaring me.'

'That's the last thing I want to do. Can I…can I hold you?' He leaned forward, rested his chin on the top of her head. His lips stirred her hair, the lightest of kisses, and then he leaned back enough to look into her eyes once again. 'Do you feel it, too? When we touch? This need that starts so deep inside and spreads?'

Yes. She felt it. And in those few short seconds Callie went through so many emotions. Love, need, affection, hope, fear.

Hope was the thing that scared her the most. Because hope was something she had kept to the parts of her life she could control.

Even when she had loved Gideon years ago she hadn't let herself hope he would love her back. Not really. Not enough to stick around and fight for that love.

And she had walked away a second time, hadn't she?

Callie stared at this man she held in the depths of her heart, and she realised she had shown weakness by walking away like that. She should have stayed and fought for what she wanted—should have at least told him what was in her heart and what she needed from him.

What was the worst that could have happened? He would have rejected her? Been there, let that

happen—not once, but twice. Well, she had decided she would go to him, and now she had that chance.

'Gideon, I want to tell you—'

'Will you let me say something first, Callie?' He squeezed her hands. 'Let me say it by showing you, and then let me say it with words? I need to do both. For this. With you.'

He stepped away, walked until he reached the first of those glass containers. He bent down and a lighter flared in the darkness. A candle came to life, and Callie realised it was inside a fluted glass cover.

Soon there were more candles lit. He stood back and Callie read the message through eyes that wanted to blur: I love you.

Her gaze flew to his while all her hopes and her heart leapt inside her.

'I love you and I need you, Callie. When I knew your life might be in danger everything inside me locked up with concern for your safety. I put it down to an old protectiveness, similar to what I felt for you when you were younger, but it was far more than that. The threat to your life made me realise I don't want to live without you. I want us to make this real.'

Gideon stepped back along the beach towards Callie. God, she looked so beautiful in the moonlight, with the flicker of the candles' glow bringing out the shine of her hair and casting shadows and light across her pale face.

She looked beautiful and scared and confused, but her gaze came to his and she drew a shaky breath. 'You…love me? How? How do you love me? As a friend? As the girl you inherited from my uncle?'

'As a friend, as that girl.' Yes, as both those things. But, oh, as so much more than that. Gideon's voice deepened as he went on. 'As the woman I held in my arms and loved and didn't realise I was loving with my heart and my soul, not only my body.'

He took her hands in his and prayed she would be able to accept what he wanted to give her.

'As someone I can't do without. I need you, Callie. I love you and need you with all my heart. I asked you to stay longer with me, but I hadn't let myself admit just why I wanted that. I love you and need you way deep down inside myself, in places I didn't know were capable of such feelings. I thought I only wanted a society wife—someone who would look good on my arm and fulfil my family's expectations for the Deveraux heir.'

He drew a slow breath.

'Being with Dianna proved how hollow that kind of relationship is. All along, deep in my heart, I knew there could be so much more with you. When I held you and made love with you I fell in love with you. And now I know that I need you…to stay with me, to be with me, to let me love you. Not for a day or a week or a few times. For ever.'

'I want to believe you, Gideon.' Her words were low, cautious. Not fully believing.

'Then believe.' He glanced at the candles burning on the beach, spelling out his message to her. 'Believe that message and believe me. I had to come back—to find you and tell you. I don't…' The words were

hard to say, but they needed to be said. ‘I don’t expect you to love me the way I love you. What I hope is that you might love me a little, and trust in that love to grow over time.’

Callie looked into Gideon’s eyes and acknowledged that she wanted and needed to trust him with her heart. To trust in the feelings he had found in himself for her. And she needed to trust the love she felt for him—trust enough to give it to him, nothing held back.

‘I don’t have to try to grow my love for you, Gid. It’s been there all these years, and it’s still there—strong and sure for you.’

‘Are you saying—?’

‘I’m saying yes.’ Oh, God. She was, wasn’t she? ‘I’m saying yes to staying. To loving and being loved by you for the rest of my life. Yes to everything you want with me.’

‘Then you’re marrying me. Soon.’

Gideon reached for her, tugged her into his arms and wrapped them right around her. He held on so tightly his fingers dug into her back, and Callie realised hers were digging into his shoulders just as much.

He kissed her so sweetly then, with such pent-up emotion, and it was the feeling in that kiss that pushed away any lingering doubt she might have had.

‘I’d made up my mind to come to you, to tell you how I felt and fight for the chance to be with you and be loved by you.’ She whispered the c
onfession into his neck, and then made herself draw back and look into his eyes, so he could see all her love in her expression. ‘I wanted to fight for you, Gid. For what we could have together. Fight instead of cut and run and not trust in the chance to be loved that way, to…to give love that way.’

‘Because you’ve been alone. You haven’t had family, except your uncle. When he died you were alone again, and I sent you away.’

Callie laid her fingers over his lips and smiled with all that was in her heart and soul. ‘Yes, but in your way you’ve been just as alone. Mary was the closest you got to real family. Your parents are self-absorbed enough that I don’t think they really count, and Dianna…’

‘Didn’t love me any more than I loved her. But I am capable of love, Callie.’ He hesitated. ‘I just needed to take it to the right person. That person…is you.’

‘I’ll move to Melbourne to be with you.’ The words were an offering. She didn’t want to be apart from him.

His fingers caught hers and squeezed. ‘I’m not taking you from here, Callie. I’ve realised how wrong that would be. We’ll make the island our base, and I’ll make changes to my workload to make it work. I can pick and choose what I do. I want—’

‘Yes?’ She searched his gaze and found all the love and hope and openness she could ever need to see shining there for her.

‘I want to be with you. I just…want you, Callie.’ He stroked her cheek with his fingers. ‘And maybe some

babies with you one day.'

Oh, yes. Babies and Gideon and a whole life ahead of them, doing whatever made them the happiest. Callie wanted that!

'I guess we both had to come to a place where we could trust in how much we needed each other.' She received his kiss and snuggled close to him as the sea breeze rustled over them. 'It's okay to need and want and…love.'

Gideon dipped his head and kissed the tip of her nose, snuggled her closer still. 'It's more than okay.' He looked into her eyes with a question and a promise and a great deal of love. 'Do you think anyone would notice if we disappeared into the storm shelter until tomorrow? I really need to be alone with you.'

'The storm shelter seems exactly the right place to go.'

Because Callie had found her safe haven in Gideon and he had found his in her while they were there.

And so that was where they went!